

The infant as reflection of soul: The time before there was a self

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ZERO TO THREE Corner

The efforts to recognize and advocate for the protection of the human rights of infants call attention to the inherent value that babies bring to society. In this thought provoking article (Zero to Three, Volume 24, Number 3), the author explores the spiritual dimensions of infant experience and the life-changing learning that being with babies can bring. Copyright ZERO TO THREE. All rights reserved. For permission to reprint, go to www.zerotothree.org/reprints.

This article is a series of personal reflections on infancy, which I view as a period during which profoundly essential human spiritual experiences occur, albeit episodically and without reflective consciousness. These spiritual experiences lie at the core of what most traditions call the soul, but they become gradually veiled as we build the psychological structures of so-called maturity. These structures greatly increase our capacities to do and to understand, but they do so at the cost of diminishing our original state of energy, openness, and joy. We, however, gradually accept the loss as normal and inevitable, as the way things are rather than as an indication of something lacking in our perception. Our entire understanding of humanity is thus diminished, including our understanding of infancy. Infants frequently hint that they are capable of experiences we no longer commonly enjoy. But having lost touch with such experiences, we can no longer recognize them. Accordingly, we cannot nurture them in our children. Eventually our children lose touch with these experiences as well, and the cycle begins again.

If we want to change this cycle, we must look at infants with new eyes. We must acknowledge them not only as our students but as our teachers, and we must open our hearts and minds to their manner of being in the world instead of focusing entirely on training them to adopt our own ways. What might this change of viewpoint allow us to see?

What might we learn about the manner in which we have understood (or failed to understand) human development? How might we view the potential role of infant studies in bringing about this new vision?

Three spiritual elements of infantile experience

If we look at children between the ages of 0 and 2 years with these new eyes, we might observe three elements of infant experience that we formerly overlooked or misunderstood. These elements are presence, joy, and awareness of others' awareness.

Presence¹ is the first such element of infant experience. Because it appears in experience prior to any thought or concept, presence is difficult to describe except through a series of negations. It is that presence to oneself without which nothing else could be present. It is pure awareness—void of content, free from all internal commentary, judgment, comparison, fear, or desire. Such is the awareness that I observe in a calmly alert newborn, whose tiny body seems wholly absorbed in sensations that are still fresh, unlabeled, and unburdened by the weight of prior experience.

The infant appears to be utterly and simply present to the moment and to the experience it offers. Indeed, the infant seems not just "present" but, more accurately, seems to embody presence itself. This quality, more so than any other, brings to mind the idea of "soul" as it is described by so many traditions.

A calm, alert newborn is present in this manner, not by choice, but because his experience necessarily lacks organized memories of previous similar experiences, expectations of what his new experience

¹ Presence, in the sense used here, points to an experience similar to

Stern's "global subjective world of emerging organization [operating] out

of awareness as the experiential matrix from which thoughts and perceived forms...will later arise." (Stern, 1985, p. 7)

should or should not be like, or desires that the experience should end or continue. The infant, without knowing it, is simply present to the miracle of being that is unfolding within him. He can maintain this presence, of course, only as long as a supportive holding environment functions around him.

Joy is the second spiritual element of infant experience. It is felt as a strong sense of being open and drawn toward something or someone in wonder, curiosity, and interest, without any fear or impulse to reject. I recall sitting in an airport recently, watching a 6- or 7-month-old baby in a little cart while her mother waited in line to buy a cup of coffee. The little girl had caught the gaze of a woman seated at a table perhaps 20 feet away. She smiled at the woman, her whole face radiating a power that could have propelled her across the space between them had she not been strapped into her seat. The woman, for her part, was enchanted by the child. The amazing thing about this scene, however, was not the woman's engagement with the child, but the baby's fascination with the woman. What about this total stranger filled this little girl with such joy? It was not any "objective" quality the woman possessed. To be sure, she had somehow caught the baby's attention, perhaps with her own smile or because of some bright color on her clothing. But these are precisely the qualities we adults usually notice for only milliseconds and then disregard as we pursue our continual search for something "really" satisfying to us. The baby's capacity to abide in such a joyful state originated not in the woman, but in the baby's own manner of perceiving. She was simply there and aware. She neither waited nor wanted; she neither judged nor compared. Her joy did not depend on the object perceived; it resided in the act of experiencing. Joy as defined here is the natural, inevitable consequence of presence.

Awareness of others' awareness is the

third element of infant experience that we often misunderstand. This is the realization that one is not alone, that other centers of awareness exist who are similarly present to their own experience. In the developmental literature, researchers give this realization considerable attention, often touting it as the crowning achievement of human development, the psychological tour de force that sets us apart from all other species. We are fairly sure we observe its rudimentary presence in the facial expressions given by a 4-month-old to his mother's face, shown on the television screen of a child development laboratory. These synchronies of shared affect will soon develop into the capacity for shared attention.

I remember watching this shared attention blossom in a 7-month-old girl who waved her arms like a choir director while her mother sang a familiar song. Whenever her mother stopped singing, the little girl stopped moving her arms. Two weeks later, I saw the little girl introduce a fascinating variation to the game: She stopped waving her arms 5 seconds after her mother began singing. Her mother obliged her by falling silent in mid-syllable. The little girl grinned, waited, then waved her arms again to make her mommy begin singing again. A few seconds later, she stopped waving and laughed when her mother once more fell silent. This awareness that "you-are-also-aware-as-I am" seems to emerge at about 8 or 9 months. It is accompanied by a burst of purposeful communicative signaling by the baby, and a strong parental sense that "she has become a person!" It will develop even more fully a year or so later with the advent of symbolic communication through language.

We can routinely observe these three elements of presence, joy, and awareness of others' awareness in infants whose minds and bodies are sufficiently "held" by their caregivers.

We have often noticed how these three elements culminate in a 14-month-old toddler who bestows his Dalai Lama smile on each of his fellow customers from his supermarket cart. We are charmed—as we should be—by the accomplishment. Yet we seem oddly unconcerned about its passing by the time the child reaches the age of 3 or 4.

Ego development and the loss of infantile experience

The calmly alert infant is present: that is, she is utterly, simply, and without distraction present to her experience of the moment. Yet before long she begins to realize that her experience of being present is not continuous. Disruptions occur. Some are caused by events in her body, in her feelings, and later, in her mind. Others are caused by the inevitable failures of the surrounding environment. These discontinuities threaten (Winnicott, 1965b, p. 47, used the term "annihilate") the infant's sense of "going on in being." She reacts by creating memory traces and familiar patterns that allow her to escape the pain of constantly going "out" of being. These tiny anticipations and recollections gradually replace the flow of interacting in the present moment and turn into an array of apparently stable "objects"—the infant's body and all the things impinging on it. Eventually, these objects seem more real to her than the flow of interactions that generated them. They become her primary reality. This is the nature of the human mind. It takes what is, at root, a dance of cosmic energies and turns it into tangible objects—mommy, daddy, bottle, me. Eventually the mind will do the same thing to itself, turning what is fundamentally pure awareness into a self-enclosed solitary consciousness. The mind will then label, and ultimately desperately defend, this consciousness as "my feelings," "my thoughts," "my self."

One way to describe this process is to say that over time the soul establishes a basic identification with the Ego. Presence, which is simply awareness of Being's interplay and movement, is gradually veiled. Without even noticing the transition, the infant's experience changes profoundly: "I who before was Being's joyful presence to itself am now an Ego, concerned with my own survival."

From one perspective, this transition is quite an accomplishment. A functioning body map, a sense of "myself" in space and time as a source of movement and coordinated activity, a set of reliable expectations about how other things behave and affect me—these are no minor achievements. We appropriately devote time, effort, and money to the study of how these expectations occur, and we determine what to do about it when they occur unevenly or with difficulty. But we shouldn't forget that they also come at a price. The loss of presence is the first payment of that price. The Ego, constructed in order to provide continuity and stability, turns into a kind of cave. The cave has two major rooms called the

past and the future. In them, we hide from "now," which is the only moment that is real.

The loss of presence has inevitable consequences for the experience of joy. As the flow of interaction solidifies into the Ego and the surrounding world of objects, the child finds it harder to remain open to every experience without fear or feelings of rejection. His brain automatically compares each present experience to all similar past ones and to their effects on himself. It categorizes experiences as pleasant or noxious, desirable or unwanted, experiences to be extended or experiences to be ended as quickly as possible. This ability to compare current to previous experience, based on the effect that such experiences had upon the organism in the past, is again extraordinarily important to development. It provides the basis for learning and is an aid to survival. Yet once again, it comes at a price.

That price is the mind's automaton-like habit of making comparisons. Within milliseconds, each moment's experience is judged and the verdict rendered: "This experience is good; I want it to continue," or "This experience is bad; I want it to end." It all happens so fast that we usually don't notice that a space actually exists between the perceiving and the judging. We notice only the wanting or not wanting—and the wanting erodes the capacity for joy. If we have a bad experience, we can't wait for it to end. If we have a good one, we want more of it and we worry that it might stop. Either way, joy—the sense of being drawn to our actual experience in wonder and curiosity without fear or repulsion—is veiled. We end up living lives in which most of our time is spent wanting to be in some other moment than the present one. In Winnicott's (1965b) terms, we have learned to "react" rather than to "be."

The veiling of presence and joy in turn affect the infant's developing awareness of others' awareness. He notices that not every experience of being seen by another is a joyful attunement provided by a parent who is simply allowing the infant to have his own experience. Sometimes he notices disapproval or anger, or worse yet, that no one is even noticing him. Without a strong sense of presence or joy upon which to rely, the infant does the only thing he can—he finds ways to maximize his chances for evoking others' approving awareness while minimizing the likelihood of provoking disapproving or failed awareness.

This strategy marks the beginning of the search for love. And once again, we find that development, even that which we call normal development, is two sided. The

capacity to allow, to notice, and to enjoy the loving attention of others is a powerful, positive force in human development. But the search to locate, acquire, and maintain that loving attention can be very problematic. To maintain her relationship to those who she believes are important to her, the infant becomes someone she is not. She learns not to cry or not to laugh, not to run too fast or to talk too loud. She learns what to say and what not to say, what is good or beautiful and what is bad or ugly. She even learns what to feel and what not to feel. By the time she has learned this last lesson, she no longer needs parents to keep her in line. She has developed what Winnicott (1965a) called a False Self, internally regulated by values she has not personally chosen.²

As I read Winnicott, the False Self is an inevitable result of even healthy Ego development. Extending his line of thought, we can say that the development of the False Self also marks the beginning of the soul's veiling, alluded to in so many creation myths as an original fall from grace, caused by the desire to possess secret knowledge of immortality. We lose our joyful awareness of being with others because we are afraid that we are each ultimately alone and cannot survive the full weight of the experience.

It is curious how little attention we adults pay to this loss. It is truly odd that we do not protest more than we do our failure to enjoy experiences we so regularly observe in our babies. We seem to accept this as the "normal" state of affairs. The absence of joy, mirrored back to us in so many ways by our society's underlying emptiness and depression, seems natural. By the time most of us reach adulthood, we have not only lost the capacity to regularly access states that we achieved routinely as infants, but we have also lost awareness of that loss.

Most adults no longer even consciously seek presence. We seem content to remain wrapped up in internal commentaries about how this moment is interesting or boring, or good or awful, about how well or how badly we are handling it, about

2 Here, Winnicott (1965a, p. 147) writes that even in normal development,

"when the degree of the split in the infant's person is not too

great, there may be some almost personal living through imitation, and it

may even be possible for the child to act a special role, that of the True

Self as it would be if it had had existence."

what happened last night or what we are going to do next. We are so accustomed to living under the compulsion to keep the internal commentary going that we rarely notice its compulsive nature. We finally admit that something is wrong only when the internal voices grow so loud and raucous as to attack us, or when the boredom or pain grow so intense that we cannot bear to wait for tomorrow, or when the hopelessness lies so heavily upon us that we can no longer even contemplate tomorrow. When the absence of presence grows this intense, we call it a disease, give it a diagnosis, and offer a treatment. The duller, more daily lack we simply call life. Perhaps that calmly alert, vibrantly alive newborn is inviting us to challenge this complacency.

In most adult life, the sense of joy is noticeably lacking. We seldom experience the immediacy and openness of being fully drawn toward whatever experience is at hand. In place of joy we accept a somewhat duller substitute, which we call "feeling happy." Even this we usually experience as a memory of some past pleasure or as a daydream of some future one. In fact, many of us would think it distinctly odd to meet a person who was simply happy to be "here." What would you really think if a colleague came into your office and whispered, "Isn't it wonderful simply to be here this morning?" As adults, we tend to believe that this kind of joy is suitable only for small children who don't know any better. Adults also routinely transform the wonderful achievement of awareness of others' awareness into something not so wonderful. For much of our adult life, we don't experience awareness of others' awareness as a joyful sharing of the miracle of consciousness. Instead, we tend to experience it as a rather painful set of internalized preoccupations about what others think of us, want from us, or might do to us, or what we think about them or need from them. Most of the time, we accept this state of affairs, too, as normal.

Acknowledging the spiritual dimension of human development

During the 20th century, most theories of development were silent about the experiences described here and about their loss over time. The most prominent theories (for example, Piagetian theory) focused heavily on the acquisition of cognitive and motor skills. Those that did concern themselves with emotional development (such as psychoanalysis) were more concerned with understanding psychopathology and saw the Ego mainly as the executive apparatus of the rational

self. Few theories said very much about human development during the fifth or sixth decades of life and beyond. In the United States in particular, we seemed interested in understanding how to promote only those soberminded, goal-directed coping skills that would enable people to become productive workers leading economically independent lives. During the second half of the century, attachment theory signaled a welcome shift in the direction of emphasizing the importance of human relatedness. But even attachment theory paid little attention to the price regularly paid for admission into the human social club.

What accounts for this collective oversight? I believe that it is at root our historical inability to come to terms with the spiritual dimension of human development. For 500 years, the west has been unable to bridge the widening gap between science and faith. In their struggle to survive the onslaught of scientific progress, proponents of organized religion have been reluctant to support empirical inquiry into the psychological dimensions of human experience. In their struggle for scientific respectability, psychologists have been timid about emphasizing those dimensions of human experience that indicate a yearning for more than just biological survival.

Perhaps today we can envision a new synthesis. Philosophers and theoretical physicists have begun to converse about the interchangeability of matter and consciousness. This dialogue has not yet percolated down to the level of standard academic psychology, much less to the world of concrete programming for young children and families. But it is becoming clear that the old war between fundamentalist soul-saving and postmodern myth-bashing is just that—an old war. It would be a wonderful thing indeed if leaders in the field of infant studies would play a role in fashioning this new synthesis.

Such an idea is not entirely fanciful. Babies by their very existence call us back to something we all sense we have lost. They do not enchant us simply because they are "cute" but because they awaken in us a thirst that sleeps deep within some wellspring of yearning that we know we have neglected. Babies are meant to challenge some of our ideas of "normal" and to teach us not to be so blasé about our adult experience.

After all, why are babies born? On the biological level, the reason is fairly clear. They are born because cellular life is genetically programmed to senescence and needs periodic refreshening.

But what about the psychological level? What are babies supposed to re-freshen within the human spirit? I suggest that they come to remind us that we, too, once were present and filled with joy in our awareness of others' awareness. If so, a complete theory of human development cannot uncritically assume that the mental life of the infant is simply a state of deficiency waiting to be remedied. Nor can it assume that the remedy is the set of cognitive and emotional skills that enable the infant to become an efficient but hassled adult just like us. Such a theory also needs to pay more attention to the ongoing developmental tasks of adult life. These tasks do not end with parenting our children only to the point that they can successfully reproduce. To go only this far toward understanding ourselves simply ensures that we and our offspring shall continue the cycle of falling asleep to humanity's deeper intuitions and aspirations. We need to broaden our view of parenting to include an openness to the forgotten dimensions of life revealed to us by our infants. If we let them, babies can teach us a lot about capacities we lost during childhood. If we are willing to receive it, they can give us the incentive we need to go about the difficult task of recovering these capacities and making them conscious, deliberate, and enduring elements in our adult lives. If we become purposefully and mindfully present, joyful, and aware of our mutual awareness, we can become clearer and purer reflections of Being's full radiance. To the extent that we complete this ultimate developmental task, we become, in the words used by the Purepecha of central Mexico to describe true shamans, "mirrors so clear that those who gaze into them can see all the way through to the other side."

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Editor's Perspective

By Miri Keren



This issue of *The Signal* comes after the 13th WAIMH Congress in Cape Town, South Africa. Each year following each WAIMH conference, we have tried to bring to our members some of the material that was discussed during key lectures and symposia, as well as some personal impressions from participants, especially to those who have not had the opportunity to attend it. From my own point of view, I was deeply impressed by the strength of African mental health clinicians to find creative ways to instill hope into despairing situations of extreme poverty and adversity. I thought of these clinicians' resilience as their ability to see beyond the risk factors and invent intervention strategies that are not written in our Western textbooks for parents and infants in extremely adverse situations. It is like being able to see the sun hiding behind big, thick, and dark clouds.

"Minding our Babies" was the theme of the conference, as it is the core of our daily work. Making our societies to mind our babies is another story...and implies that we need to go one step further to "translate" this psychological concept into words that can be easily understood by all policy makers. This is why Infant Mental Health policy papers from different Affiliates and countries, such Catherine Mc Guire's (Ireland) and the ZERO to THREE (USA), are so important.

Besides the importance of having a written policy statement, like any declarative document, it is essential to include the action steps that translate policy into practice. Otherwise, health or mental health or early care and education policy makers may very well agree with the principles, but won't necessarily know how to support them or take the action steps necessary to put them into practice.

As mental health clinicians, many of us are trained to facilitate the being" and the "reflective Stance," more than the "doing." I personally think that this gap is one of the reasons that explains why many talented clinicians stay in the clinical setting and let "others" deal with the politics of health or mental health or early care management at the policy or societal level. To put in action our main concepts of infant mental health is really not an easy task! For example, it may be difficult for the Argentinian Health Minister to put into action the implications of Clara's study on the link between self and interactive regulation with reflective functioning and healthy development.

Just as WAIMH has many years of history, *The Signal* has gone through several editors, with different agendas. I have been in charge of the editorship for the last 4 years and I have been lucky to be given the opportunity to make it move from the format of a Newsletter, to a more scientific and clinically-oriented publication where WAIMH members can feel free to bring their knowledge and experience for readers to share. In addition, we have now the tradition of inserting two "Corners": the ZERO to THREE one...thanks to Stephanie Powers...and the Affiliates one, thanks first to Mark Tomlinson (South Africa), then to Martin Saint Andre (Quebec, Canada) and Maree Foley (New Zealand)! The Signal does not have the strict standards of a peer reviewed journal, such as the *Infant Mental Health Journal*. Still we have tried to maintain a "good-enough" scientific level.

On the personal level, it has been for me a very special intellectual, as well as emotional, experience. Indeed, reaching out to authors in search of interesting papers is not an easy task. Most WAIMH members are very busy and for many, and for me, as well, English is not our native language. I was lucky to have the continuous help of a few colleagues, very committed to WAIMH, such as Minna Sorsa, Hi Fitzgerald, and Debbie Weatherston who worked very hard on the editing. Minna learned to use a new software that enabled us to change the external look of *The Signal* into colored, broad-spaced columns and pictures that resonates extremely well with Infancy...This is why we have felt a bit proud like new parents each time *The Signal* is published and is sent to you! I also wish to thank our Editorial Board that has tried to keep their promise to send us two papers per year...Because I became WAIMH President at the Cape Town Conference, this is the last issue that I will oversee as Editor of *The Signal*. I have asked Debbie Weatherston to take over the Editorship of *The Signal* and she will take the lead; Hi Fitzgerald has agreed to assist. Expect many more changes that reflect the growth of this important and ever-expanding world organization!