

Within or without: Considering men's needs in the time of fatherhood

by Elmer Postle
co-founder Fathers-To-Be

How do we consider the needs of men who are becoming fathers? It's a question women ask of men who are interested in pregnancy and birth and it's a question that can get reduced to a joke or bypassed by men themselves. What are the steps we need to take to begin to consider it seriously?

I have trained in a variety of therapeutic approaches concerning birth psychology and was recently assisting on a prenatal and birth psychotherapy course at Anstruther in Scotland. The course was led by Prenatal and Birth Therapists Charisse Basquin and Klaus Kaepelli. Participants came to the group to know more about decisive influences from the beginning of their lives. The practical intention of the course leaders is to hold clear psychological and physical boundaries and principles to create an 'optimal' healthy setting. In this safe psychological environment, the healing of wounds and trauma from life in the womb and birth / early infancy becomes possible rather than something to defend against. Within this intended 'optimal setting' the subtle and not so subtle complexities, dynamics and strategies that were engaged with for survival reasons early in life can be approached and released. Using a horticultural metaphor: a survival strategy learned early in life is like a piece of wire holding up a tree that has not been replaced as the tree grew. For eg: to not connect deeply with anyone - useful for survival as a way to make sense of an experience of terrifying abandonment and not go mad as an infant - is destructive later in life when deeper relationship may be the source of happiness. When these strategies and decisions from early life are brought to consciousness in a supportive and gentle environment, according to the principles guiding this work, the person and by extension the group of people present can enter profound realms of choice and healing.

The deep nourishment and resource of the infant, mother, father triad in its optimal sense could be experienced with the therapists (and occasionally other group members) playing 'mother and father'. Not all the sessions had this dynamic played out but when it happened it touched me deeply. The participants, as infant, could find and lean against 'mother' as played by Charisse who in turn leaned against a resourced 'father' played by Klaus.

It was a moment of reflection for me. As co-founder with Patrick Houser of Fathers-to-Be and a father of a six year old, having myself spent time thinking and exploring what it is a father draws on for support in the act of parenting.

As Klaus sat there being truly supportive I appreciated how much of a skill it is to do all this well: to be a support as a therapist and to be a loving father.

In the therapeutic sense the clear and resourced modelling of the clear boundaries of the therapists playing the 'good parents' enabled the participants to, in turn, model it for their own 'inner child'. It was clear the 'good enough' parent was itself a life-potential just waiting for the go-ahead in the therapist and by extension, the client. Like a potency, ready to activate and unfold; like the wings of the butterfly or a plant in the desert at the sight of rain, in the right circumstances it will come forward and do its job. The 'felt sense' of the model of connection played by the therapists, in the optimal environment, held in part also by the group, literally helps the participant change their minds about the world they inhabit.

Loving 'father' boundaries and the modelling of them by the strong male therapist impressed me. He spoke of being supported by family back home, his colleagues, by me as assistant in the room. He could say truthfully there was enough support for him to hold the group and the individual. It felt

true and without posturing. This place in the therapeutic environment, (or as father responding to a child's request for help at home), is no place for heroics. It has to be a real connection to support, whether by faith or physical to succeed. I know as a father how easy it can be to hold wonderful boundary lines and feel this support and then in the next instant upset them which is like tripping with a tray full of tea cups and milk. It can all fall down when I revisit, once again, the place where I don't know the truth of support in the emotional region my child and I have wandered into now.

And then, even again, after the clearing up, the possibility or reconnection between us is revealed once again in the urgency of the development between the parent and child. The potentials of the 'Divine triad' of the mother, father and baby as Binnie A. Dansby calls it, seem to be innate in some way. By healing the 'original intimacy' as Dansby calls it, we are able to engage in subsequent intimacy and receive its gifts. The act of parenting at birth, such a perfectly focussed and often intense moment of creativity and relationship, can be a metaphor for how relationship then forms in the other stages of life.

Psychotherapist Klaus Cappelli's response to a question on what it is that the father 'should do' in order to be present in a supportive way for his family at the time of birth made sense to me. He said:

'the fathers task is to find out what he needs for his support'.

It's for him to enquire after his needs rather than be told what they are.

In Janel Miranda's upcoming film 'The Other Side Of The Glass', partly about fathers and birth, an interviewee states that for fathers it's about 'faith'. The connection with the baby is not physical in the sense that it's in the body, as it is for the woman/mother. He has to trust in an invisible connection in relationship. This is interesting, because so much is made of fathers providing materially, yet little credence is given to faith or the invisible in 'being provided for' ourselves.

Its outside the scope of this article to enlarge upon too much but it is possible to say organised religion and its abuses have given male spiritual connection a bad name. Swinging to the other extreme in a materialistic culture, spirituality / invisible connections can become ridiculed as not essential to survival. If there's not an acknowledgement of relationship and where 'support' comes from then the true support (for no one is truly separate) comes from the shadows. As my son Lucien found as he wakes up in tears with a bad dream, just now as I write. He says: 'daddy took my peanut butter on toast and didn't make me any more'. This is a perfect example (though his dream) of the nourishment the father receives coming inappropriately from the family. If father is heroically imagining himself separate from needing support, person to person, faith or otherwise, then it's with his cleverness and fixing that he does the job of fathering.

The mother delivering her baby is in the thick of interconnectedness, relationship and therefore questions of support; her baby *is her* and then on the 'outside' *utterly* dependent on her for life and its potential.

When the father asks 'what is it I need for support?', he enters into the world of the mother and the baby therefore. At the same time anchors himself in faith that the universe can support him in what he is doing. He experiments with the thought; *'There is something that is supporting me, as I support them.*

Is he able to know what his true thought of love is in these moments of parenting? By asking what it is he needs for support, he is being present to himself; and that rubs off on everyone around him. Being present can enable relationship, whatever the series of personal, political and social dynamics and involvements in the support of the birthing process turns out to be. If he is participant; up-close

and personal in the birth at one end of the continuum or waiting at home by mutual consent, at the other, this choice to be 'present' is experienced as loving participation.

This movement into the world of the mother and baby and remain himself is precisely what he needs to do to be present as the father. And it will touch, reveal and potentially release, as imaginary, illusions of macho heroic independence as he does do. Finding out what *he needs* as support is probably the biggest step he can take into relationship.

Fathers are now attending 90-95% of births in the west. Fathers have virtually no training in this, and in some ways one has to ask; 'Is it possible to train men for something when there's little culture of preparation or even acknowledgement that birth is important, even barely for women'. There is little culture of discussion about fathers experience among men. Two or three sentences seem to suffice between most male work colleagues on this subject.

But lets imagine ourselves supportive of masculinity here for a moment. Perhaps in those three sentences more is communicated than meets the eye. Perhaps what's needed is not a deluge of emotional sharing but more opportunities for short sentences and meaningful looks!! Comparing men's way of connection to women's is a mistake. As valuable as feminism is and patriarchy really is necessarily defunct, it's important to track also what is truly valuable in men's connection. As I come to a conclusion, and discussion about men's needs, I arrive therefore at the discussion of discussion: what can be discussed about birth between men? But even that is perhaps a step too far. Really the first discussion around men and birth is within the father concerned himself; contemplating the question: what is it I need for support (in this situation)?

www.FathersToBe.org