

What Mothers Do

Especially When It Looks Like Nothing

Naomi Stadlen. (2004). London: Piatkus.

Every new mother should read this book, if only to learn she needn't read any other. It will also interest students of phenomenological research as it demonstrates the level of understanding possible when we *really* allow phenomena to speak to us. For psychotherapists the author indirectly addresses a critical question we, as counsellors, constantly ask ourselves: What do we do in therapy that seems to help our clients so much? Naomi Stadlen, a breastfeeding counsellor and existential therapist, finds words for those 'vital mothering acts', which don't exist in patriarchal discourse. She opens up areas within feminist research using phenomenology to look at female experiences of mothering, an area neglected by contemporary sociology. Naomi has been facilitating weekly groups for mothers for over two decades. As a phenomenologist, she has carefully listened to many mothers describe what they do with their babies. Consequently, the book's insights into mothers' actions far exceed any psychoanalytically/psychologically-founded theorisation. Stadlen is astonished by the authority given to male experts over the past millennia, where mothering has been concerned. She explores 'truths' from psychoanalysts (such as Winnicott) and paediatricians (like Spock) to show how fragile those 'certainties' really are. Ultimately Stadlen's voice is that of an existentialist fighting a dogma that tries to define and control the early relationship between mother and baby. Her empowering call to women is: listen to your baby for guidance.

It has been over 8 years since I 'suffered' under the guidance of such experts regarding the way I mothered my daughter Zoe, then newborn. When she became the centre of my world I was told I needed to think more about myself - when this was impossible I felt a total failure. When I couldn't account for my day I was told it was because I instigated no order in her feeding patterns. I felt like a truant from 'real' life and 'real' work in my early years of mothering. And I felt ashamed of my malingering. When I read Stadlen's book I cried with relief: All those years when I thought I was incapable or lazy - or even sick, because I felt permanently exhausted - I was actually busy *mothering*.

So what, according to Stadlen's mothers, characterises mothering? Firstly, the mother is *being present* - she is simply being-with. Interestingly, we as therapists struggle somewhat with this activity, as it involves doing nothing but being fully there for the other. Stadlen points to another 'nameless activity' - *dropping everything to attend to the crying baby*. That's when the mother leaves shampoo in her hair or cuts a friend off in mid-sentence of a 'life or death' story because she just 'has to go' to her baby's rescue. *Comforting* is something else mothers spend much time

doing. They find this hard to recount (value) later in the evening, when sharing the day's activities with their partners. They struggle to justify the 'lost' time - because, as Stadlen tells us over and over again, we do not have words for such activities. Should, I ask myself, *comforting* appear on a woman's CV (in masculine, measurable terms): "quickly learned how to comfort my crying baby effectively and efficiently by independently developing a procedure for babies' needs assessment which secured 70% success rate in reduction of crying activity within 10 seconds of initial contact"? How triumphant! But comforting is not just about the change of baby's behaviour - it goes further, Stadlen notices. It involves mother feeling compassion towards her suffering baby. A mother, Stadlen observes, uses her compassion to help her baby restore his sense of strength. Stadlen offers a phenomenological account of a mother comforting. The similarity between this and therapeutic comforting is striking. The mother acknowledges her baby's distress by dropping whatever else she's doing at the time, she then assesses the severity of the situation and calmly 'normalises' baby's state. She is now in a twosome with her baby and the rest of the world recedes into the background. She has a choice: enter into baby's distress (the choice a therapist faces with his/her clients constantly) or monitor her own arousal levels and calm him¹ down instead. Stadlen's research demonstrates that mothers almost always choose the latter.

Stadlen examines another unrecognised motherly activity: *Making-space* and *opening*. 'The mother has to provide physical space in the womb'; some months later 'giving birth requires tremendous physical opening of the cervix'. Once she has her baby, 'she has to open herself in a different way. Her awareness seems to open wide to encompass her baby' (p 184). This process changes women completely and irreversibly. Somehow, Stadlen points out, women seem to *stay* 'open', and never quite return to their former selves. 'Making this shift to create such an intimate space is a complicated process. But the most confusing part for a mother may well be the lack of a positive word to honour it' (p 186). Because there is no term to recognise the process the mother may never be aware of her feat, and is very likely to rebuke herself for not 'doing more' (as this happened to me, as a mother I find this extremely validating.)

The writer also recognises the change of pace that characterises mothering. Imagine you are trying to be present and comforting, whilst making space and remaining open for the other, all at the same time? Surely you'd be forced to slow down? Mothers slow down for their babies. Like 'making space', slowing down starts with pregnancy. Mum is too

¹ In order to make a distinction between mother and baby (with an apology to female babies) Stadlen uses male pronoun for all babies throughout the text. I follow her convention.

heavy to rush around like she used to. Later, after birth, baby shows preference for a slower pace - 'he likes time to study and learn about the world' (p 188). But be warned, 'reducing her pace can leave the mother feeling sidelined, and perhaps depressed and demoralised.' Had this been an act endorsed by 'experts', mothers might have felt a sense of achievement, rather than failure. Stadlen associates another two words with slowing down: *surrender* and *patience*. The latter occurs, she says, 'when a stronger person doesn't try to impose her way by brute force, but respects the wishes of a dependent person' (p 190). A mother surrenders to her child's pace and exercises patience.

She is also slowed down by the sheer amount of tasks hiding under one obvious chore. When she does her supermarket shopping, mum is actually doing her motherly work. Although she would say that she was 'simply shopping', she is 'guiding him [her baby] into the kind of behaviour that she considers appropriate for his age in a public place... demonstrating specific supermarket behaviour ...showing him her personal values... such as calculating prices or prioritising speed, and demonstrating how she relates to the check out staff' (p 83). She is sharing her world with baby and, as Stadlen points out, this is very demanding. No wonder: the mother is fulfilling an important social role - 'Each mother builds a bridge that links her individual child to the social world that we all share... Our whole society depends on the way each mother relates to her child. This is her motherly work' (ibid).

What Mothers Do is a good example of phenomenological research. It treats mothers' experiences with indubitable respect. Stadlen's introductory explanations regarding her research 'method' describe her own state of unknowing as she begins the process of 'collecting' women's stories; she starts her research in order to understand her own experiences as a mother, not to prove a hypothesis. She experiments with set questionnaires, but soon abandons them in favour of simple, old-fashioned listening, where the researcher's *interest* galvanises the respondents' exploration of their experiences. Very few prompting questions are required. Eventually Stadlen becomes aware of a particular form beyond the details of the women's stories. She sees a pattern in the way women change when they become mothers. She is careful, however, not to ignore discordant voices. She tells us that she has learnt not to reduce conflicting stories to one 'uniform harmonious choir'² and in this way she sought to find words for mothering acts. However, it is important to note that she mostly spoke to non-working mothers. This was likely due to the fact that they were most available to the researcher. Therefore, this has limited the range of voices the author can discuss and we can only assume the phenomenology of the

² From Thucydides 'who gathered much of his information for *The Peloponnesian War* from conversation' (p 9).

‘mothering acts’ of the working mother. Perhaps, for this reason, the writer noticeably emphasises that she in no way advocates a specific mothering life-style. However, the fact remains that by naming vital mothering acts the book clearly blesses the mother who accommodates, adjusts, creates space, slows pace and surrenders to her baby. Sure, this type of mothering is possible around working hours, but that is a different kind of surrender. Consequently, in these pages stay-at-home mothers in particular find a sense of pride around mothering. Ultimately, Stadlen invites the reader to witness motherly acts. This validates motherly work. It worked for me.

Sanja Oakley

Writing Cures

An Introductory Handbook of Writing in Counselling and Therapy

Edited by Gillie Bolton, Stephanie Howlett, Colin Lago and Jeannie K. Wright. (2005). Brunner Routledge.

Writing Cures is a book about the therapeutic possibilities of the written word, both within and without the context of therapy. The book considers writing in all its forms, from poetry and letter writing to journal-keeping and on-line therapy, and it considers it for clients, for students, for people in distress, for people in change, for therapists, for workers, arguably for all of us. It is a substantial book - “introductory” is arguably something of a misnomer - and overall it is a well-judged brew of example, erudition, and practicality.

The book is in four sections which make a good rough sense of the rather overwhelming 22 chapters. This would be my major criticism of the book, that it is perhaps a little overlong with some repetition. Part 1 - “Theory and Research” - looks at the history and traditions of writing as therapy as well as the more empirical evidence for its utility. Part 2 - “Writing in therapy” - looks at the role of writing in cognitive analytic therapy, in addictions work, in the medical arena, in clinical psychology practice and in mental health work. It develops ideas of writing as a therapeutic endeavour in and of itself, as well as considering its contribution to the process of change by providing clients with something more permanent to which they can refer back. Media covered include journals, diaries, letters (sent and unsent), poems, diagrams, dialogues, set work and free writing. This is the strongest section, ranging from the pragmatic to the profound, and it contains numerous ideas and techniques that could complement or be integrated into a range of approaches to therapeutic work. I also very much liked the quote from Margaret Atwood which concludes Williamson’s chapter on writing in recovery from addiction... “Possibly, then, writing has to do with darkness, and a desire or