

significant ‘*world collapse*’, and it becomes difficult for them to regain the original sense of ‘*groundedness*’, or world, that they experienced prior to this. I agree that this may not be anything particularly new for any of us in the course of our work, but I think it is helpful to engage with this theme on a phenomenological level in order to be clearer on the factual as well as possibility-oriented aspects of the work world and the employee’s relation to, and experience of, it. I think this book has also left me with an awareness of the need for us to focus much more on the way in which moods play a crucial role in our work. The moods of resentment, resignation, sadness, indignation and anger all come to mind when I recall clients’ struggles in their experiences at work, and the fact that this informs the themes of our conversations.

A number of ideas, I feel, stem from the Dreyfusian approach to reading Heidegger (or as Dreyfus’s colleague, John Searle describes it, ‘Dreydigger’), drawing additionally on the skill-acquisition model that Dreyfus developed under the strong influence of Merleau-Ponty’s writings. I find this conducive to my own way of understanding Heidegger, though readers might need to be aware that this has been considered an American Pragmatist reading, and that other ways of adapting Heidegger’s ideas to the educational and workplace domains might be just as compelling, if not more so.

All in all, I was very much taken by this book for its focus on worlds that I think are troublesome for many individuals, whether they be related to education, learning or work. I am also grateful to Gibbs’ own work for bringing me back to the question of how we can invite clients to think about and engage with these worlds in more resourceful ways.

Mo Mandić

How Mothers Love – and How Relationships are Born

Naomi Stadlen. (2011). London: Piatkus

Why would existential therapists be interested in a book about motherhood? Having read this particular book my reply would be: Why would we not? This book is about the beginning of relating. Heidegger didn’t write much about mothers or birth but he did have a lot to say about death. Death for Dasein is non-relational and in death ‘all its relations to any other Dasein have been undone’ (Heidegger, 1962: p294). But what about the beginning of Dasein, when all its relating is still to be done?

How Mothers Love is an important book for therapists and other professionals, but it is also accessible to the general reader. It is a phenomenological study of mothers, a sequel to *What Mothers Do* (2004). Both books describe what mothers do; both in the everyday practical sense and also reminding us of other aspects of motherhood: the societal ‘...collectively, mothers are working to initiate a new generation into how

to relate to other people' (p3), and political, *'Every society owes a great deal to the work of its mothers'* (p307). Unlike many other writings on parenting by psychotherapists, the emphasis is on all mothers rather than focusing on those for whom things go wrong in some sense.

In these books, Stadlen writes about the mothers she has come across in the course of her work as a breastfeeding counsellor and a convener for the past 20 years of weekly discussion groups for mothers. She gives us typical selections of their actual verbatim speech so that we can hear their voices for ourselves. In addition to this, Stadlen shares with us her insights about motherhood gained from her experiences as an existential psychotherapist and as a mother, and also her wide knowledge of literature. Quotations are used to illuminate her ideas or to contrast with them rather than to be instructive. Her project is not to use her findings to educate mothers but to learn what mothers can teach us.

Stadlen uses quotations from diverse sources, ranging from Field-Marshal Montgomery's autobiography to the words of her grandson, but throughout the book her own voice shines through. For example, she contributes to the debate as to whether babies are aware of their own feelings first and experience themselves as family members later, or the other way around by suggesting that it depends upon the family context rather than being one or the other. She describes the conventional theories on parenthood, but very often the data she presents contradict the conventional ideas and at the very least raise questions about these theories. For example, in opposition to Freud's theories of sibling rivalry, after presenting her own findings, she states: *'There is no need for siblings to be rivalrous'* (p241). Stadlen never allows herself to be constrained by theory, but is truly existential in beginning with the phenomena themselves, in this case the words of mothers. She is never authoritarian: the data is presented and the reader is allowed to draw his or her own conclusions.

The verbatim quotes together with Stadlen's conversational style of writing give her books vividness and a contemporary feel. The mothers Stadlen meets are in London and are mostly from a particular set of mothers who want to join a group of mothers talking. After reading her first book, I did wonder how much these views represented the experience of mothers who are not from this set. In the second book however, Stadlen answers this question by describing how the first book generated responses from all over the world. While one could argue that these responses were from articulate readers and do not represent women from more primitive cultures, it does seem that Stadlen is tuning into many aspects of motherhood that are eternal and universal.

Stadlen's work is lively, entertaining and deceptively easy to read. I found many points of recognition that reminded me of my own experience of motherhood, but also there were times when the descriptions in the book

surprised me and I was jolted out of my memories to acknowledge the otherness of many people's experiences. While reading the first book I appreciated it mainly for the way it helped me to recall and reflect upon my own experience as a mother. I didn't realize how it would inform my work with clients, not just with mothers of babies but with individuals talking about their experiences as children in their family relationships. In this second book I was much more aware of the insights I was gaining about ways of relating within families. For example in the following passage on the difficulties that can arise in a mother's relationship with a child who is repeatedly doing something that is potentially dangerous:

He keeps returning to the gas tap, not to drive her insane, but (so I believe from listening to many mothers describing this kind of situation) to get a better reaction from her. He seems to want her to acknowledge that he is not a monster but her lovable son – even if he plays with the gas tap

(p280-281)

So too my clients describe how they repeatedly act in ways that may destroy their own lives. I can talk with my clients about their experiences, but how is it possible to find out about babies and the beginning of all relating? Surely the only way is to talk with and listen to mothers.

As I was reading the book, I sometimes came across some things I didn't like, but my dislike mostly unravelled as I read on and better understood what Stadlen was saying. My first criticism was that the chapter headings don't always tell you what the chapter is about. For example, Chapter three has the title: '*I don't know*' which turns out to be a typical phrase from the mother of a baby, in this case an experienced mother who says: '*But I really don't know. I've learned, as a mother, to accept things, not to solve them.*' (p43). So it seems that this criticism is also what I most like about the book: it is necessary to actually read it to understand what the author is saying. This book is never predictable.

The first chapter '*Making heartroom*' is about how a mother makes a space for her baby; the word heartroom coming from a letter by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The second chapter, '*House-room without heartroom*' is about what happens when things go wrong and there is insufficient heartroom for the baby. This is a theme travelling through the whole book: to begin with the simple case and then move on to the more complex (where possible within the scope of the book). There are many psychotherapy and parenting books that talk about what happens when things go wrong: a family splits up, someone dies, a parent has an affair. Stadlen writes about these possibilities, but before that she describes the straightforward: what happens when a mother and child relate happily together, what happens when parents stay together to raise a child. After a phenomenological description of these experiences Stadlen turns to the

more complex: failures of mother-baby intimacy, marriage break-ups. Similarly, in the chapter '*Family relationships*', Stadlen describes grandmothers who admire their daughters or daughters-in-law as mothers before describing the grandmothers who are less helpful, and where there is conflict with the mothers: for example those who compete with their daughters and act as if they themselves are the mothers of their grandchildren.

There are many thought-provoking ideas in the book. For example, in Chapter 10 entitled '*I can't do intimacy*', Stadlen defines intimacy by finding the origin of the word in the Latin '*Intimus*' which is the superlative of the preposition '*inter*' meaning '*between*': '*...the meaning of an intimate relationship seems to be one that is most intensely between two people.*' (p166).

In the final chapter entitled '*Mothers Together*', Stadlen discusses her opinions concerning a lack of respect for mothers within our culture. She uses a mother's words to beautifully demonstrate how health professionals may be dismissive of mothers. The mother contrasts her doctor's response to her description of her sick child with that of her vet when she described her ailing cat: '*I said, "He's not behaving like his usual self". The vet really listened to me. He assumed I knew what I was talking about. Whereas with [my baby], my doctor assumed he knew.*'

The stated intention of this book is that it is: '*a study of the dialogues that arise during all those repetitive everyday actions that mothers get to know so well...How Mothers Love is a tentative study of the loving actions of mothers.*' (p2). This intention has been achieved and I would recommend this book to anyone who is interested in learning more about the ways we relate to each other. It is a very generous book. Stadlen has a profound understanding of motherhood and she shares some of this with the reader. In a way it is an intimate experience, reading the book: sharing the very personal thoughts of many people regarding the very beginning of intimacy between a newly born human and his mother. It is a very existential book: '*The kind of person the child will become is his own choice.*' (p3). And has a very clear message: '*Mothering certainly matters. But that doesn't mean all mothering has to be the same*' (p302).

References

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