

Soul 

Connections

Testing Times

On Friday morning October 8th, I opened the Irish Examiner (Feelgood section) and began reading Helen O'Callaghan's article 'Longing for the Gift of Life'. Being in the profession (I am a psychotherapist and author of books on childbirth and parenting) as well as being a mother myself, I have a perhaps greater than average interest in anything to do with babies and childbirth. As I read, I became increasingly uncomfortable. The image of what looked like an egg but which could just as easily be a planet in our galaxy, and the heading 'selling eggs on the web' disturbed me to the extent that I had to force myself to read on. Attempting to analyse my reaction I asked myself why get so disturbed by something that is by now, part of modern life? Assisted reproduction, surrogacy, egg and sperm donation and test tube babies have been around for quite some time. And what about the thousands of couples who benefit from such technology?

That same morning, I received in the post an article cut out of the French newspaper 'Ouest France' from my elderly father. It was an article about a hospital in Brest that is applying new principles in the care of premature babies by attempting to recreate a 'womb-like' environment in the neonatal unit. This touched me. My father, who is 94 years old and suffers from poor eyesight, rarely sends letters. He was remembering no doubt the time over 50 years ago now when, weighing in at 3 pounds, I was born two months premature and remained for some weeks in the neonatal unit in Galway hospital.

So here I was, faced with an interesting paradox. Medical technology such as it was then had probably helped me survive the trauma of my birth and arguably increased my chances of living to be the fully-grown up person I am now. At one level however, it had cost my mother and me a great deal, as my therapeutic journey would later show. The psychological impact of not only birth but also prenatal life is very well documented by now. No doubt being catapulted into life in this way had some part to play in leading me to study psychology and write my first book *Songs From the Womb* (Collins Press, 1998). The medicalised management of childbirth and our technological advances are designed to make our lives easier and in the case of assisted reproduction, give us what nature has for its own reason's denied us. But is there a cost?

I believe there is. Technology, last time I looked, has no soul. Neither does the medical institution, which is based on the division of mind and body and has turned birth from a natural event to a technological feat. And since as human beings, we are made up of both body and soul, mind and matter and so much more, how can technology or medicine ever



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even come near to understanding the mystery of human life? Egg and sperm have become so detached from their human homes we should ask ourselves how it is that we are now producing babies as commodities. What happens to the psyche of the child produced in this way? From research and studies in pre-and perinatal psychology we know that not only what happens in the womb and at birth but also at conception is grafted into the psyche of the child creating patterns that are carried into later life. We also know that psychological life begins well before birth and therefore that if a baby is conceived and carried by a host mother for example and then handed over to a new mother, the memory of those nine months can never be erased and may surface later in life. Prenatal life and birth are **FORMATIVE** experiences. Our earliest relationships (in the womb) and just after birth forms the template for all future relationships. I know from working with many adoptees that the earliest wound of being 'given away' at birth never goes away. Nor does the longing at some deep and fundamental level to make some connection with a birth mother and even father, ever go away. And what happens to the child of the egg or sperm donator, who at 18 wants to trace its genetic parents? Or, as in a recent film the baby who is born handicapped of surrogate parents and then abandoned? As the article says, there are huge implications. I agree, but these implications are not just ethical, moral and social, they are also psychological.

You might think I am against artificial or assisted reproduction. I am not for or against. However, I am concerned that we are straying much too far away from nature and ourselves. In a world where natural childbirth has almost been made redundant by large-scale technological advancements whereby caesarean sections have become a matter of choice of birth and babies are being technologically created to meet consumer demand, it is difficult to hang on to our humanness. It is this same world which despite great technological and scientific advances, has an ever-increasing rate of suicides and mental and emotional malaise. In a time when women are leasing their wombs to the highest bidders, human beings are being fabricated in laboratories and then implanted in wombs that have become mere growing mediums and there is talk of human cloning, we need to ask ourselves, are we playing God?

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