

REBIRTHING: IS IT MARVELOUS OR TERRIBLE?

by

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Rebirthing arouses controversy. It gets into books it should never get into² and does not get into books it should get into.³ It gets accused of things that have nothing to do with it.⁴ At the same time it attracts clients from all walks of life and many of its practitioners have additional qualifications in different forms of psychotherapy and counselling. Why does Rebirthing generate so many misunderstandings - and so many understandings?

Rebirthing's problems come under the following categories: Leonard Orr, theory and philosophy, irresponsible claims, technique - especially hyperventilation, the inadequate literature, the training of Rebirthers, and client suitability and unsuitability; and I will write about each of these in this article.

My position about Rebirthing is that it is marvelous: a truly marvelous method of psychotherapy and of personal and spiritual development. Rebirthing can deal with what can be called "Freudian" problems - the yelling, bawling, screaming, emotional problems with parents, relationships, sex, jealousy, envy, power and power-games. It can deal with what can be called "Jungian" problems. Some of these are the same as Freudian problems, but are experienced on a different energy level: less violently emotional and more profound. Other Jungian experiences that Rebirthing gives access to include various altered states of consciousness including shamanic states, the energy states which Jung called archetypes, and the Meeting with the Self. Rebirthing can also, and effortlessly, take people into deep meditative states comparable to those described in certain ancient religious texts.⁵

Now I am not going to say that Rebirthing is always marvelous. That would make a very boring article and it would not be true. The early Rebirthing books contain enough hyperbole without anyone adding to it; their valuable and informative parts drown in it. What I hope to do in this article is to separate the marvelous from the terrible. I will also define clearly the conditions under which I think Rebirthing is marvelous.

TERRIBLE REBIRTHING: SOME CRITICISMS OF REBIRTHING

¹ *The Therapist : J. of the European Therapy Studies Institute, Spring 1995.*

² Yapko, 1994, see Manné 1995.

³ Timmons and Ley, 1994.

⁴ Minnett, 1994 : 27.

⁵ Minnett, 1994; Manné, 1994.

What is so terrible about Rebirthing? This is what Stan Grof has said about it:

"Breathing is a powerful tool for changing consciousness, that has been used for millennia in different parts of the world. A technique which utilises it is bound to produce impressive experiences and - in general - offer possibilities of change that surpass most that academic psychology has to offer. However, the practical potential of #Rebirthing' contrasts painfully with Leonard Orr's effort to offer a conceptual framework, ... As long as he continues talking in such terms as #the five biggies' or #physical immortality', and death as ultimate hypocrisy, and combines it with the use of simple-minded affirmations, and emphasis on financial success, he has little chance of being taken seriously. He is bound to attract superficial popularity and turn off people with common sense and basic sensibility - not just the academic circles. The best he can hope for is that his contributions will be respected in spite of - certainly not because of - his intellectual pursuits.⁶

There are other criticisms of Rebirthing:

Arthur Janov does not appreciate Rebirthing one bit and thinks Rebirthers are charlatans who have stolen his ideas.⁷ If Janov has produced a well-argued, detailed criticism about either the Rebirthing method or Rebirthing theory I am not aware of it.

In *Innovative Therapies in Britain*, Windy Dryden⁸ has understood Nicholas Albery⁹ to warn people not to fall into the hands of the Rebirthers. I was surprised. I do not understand Albery's book to warn against Rebirthing and I did not expect anything so casual and unprofessional as that type of dismissal of Rebirthing in a book on innovative therapies.

Michael Yapko does not like Rebirthing either. In his book *Suggestions of Abuse: true and false memories of childhood sexual trauma* he mentions "a therapy called rebirthing and reparenting .. which involved guiding the individual back in time in order to relive the process of being born"¹⁰ and "a therapeutic process commonly called #rebirthing' in which a therapist tells the client she "must have (had) a traumatic birth".¹¹ Yapko is disparaging, but on what grounds? Hardly either scientific or intellectual ones. "Guiding a person back in time", no matter what the moment in time is, is Regression Therapy, Active Imagination, Rêve Eveillé (Awake Dreaming), some form of Hypnosis, Neuro-Linguistic Programming or other similar techniques; *I do not know upon what authority it can be called Rebirthing*. And when a therapist tells a client that s/he "must have had" anything it is purely and simply bad therapy. Therapist of many schools and techniques who tell clients what they "must have had" are a theme of Yapko's book. I do not understand why he chooses to take Rebirthing for the scapegoat.

I am sure there are more examples that I do not know about.

With the exception of Grof, what the examples above indicate is that *without any respectable basis of knowledge and evidence*: on the basis of his own claimed but supposedly

⁶ Albery, 1985 : 81f.

⁷ "A whole cottage industry of rebirthers has grown up around my discoveries, leading to the most dangerous kind of charlatanism." Janov, 1991, p. xii. See also Manné, 1995b.

⁸ Rowan & Dryden, 1987 : 289.

⁹ Albery, 1985.

¹⁰ Yapko, 1994 : 62; see also Manné, 1995b.

¹¹ Yapko, 1994 : 74.

unrecognised paternity (Janov), misunderstanding (Dryden) and anecdote (Yapko); respectable psychologists who write intelligent books¹² are rejecting Rebirthing.

The title of this paper shows that I accept that Rebirthing has elements that are doubtful and that can and should be subject to criticism. Let us remember that this is true for any form of psychotherapy and for any method of personal and spiritual development.

I cannot meaningfully discuss criticisms that are vague or unfounded, but a criticism that is honestly expressed can be honoured in all of its details. Grof has summed up some of the "terrible" aspects of Rebirthing. Grof's points are (1) Orr's contribution to Rebirthing, (2) the problem that Orr attracts "superficial popularity", and (3) elements in the conceptual framework of Rebirthing such as (i) the five biggies, (ii) physical immortality and death as the ultimate hypocrisy, (iii) simple-minded affirmations, (iv) financial success. I will answer Grof and then I will make more serious criticisms.

1. The problem of Leonard Orr.

There is no use denying that Leonard Orr is an obstacle if not a liability with regard to Rebirthing being taken seriously as a marvelous method of therapy.

Orr does unconventional things and expresses unconventional ideas, with much confidence and with, seemingly, a total absence of self-criticism. Among other things, he has given himself a "guru" name, "Young Len Orr Raja", appointed himself as a guru, and invited people to become his disciples. At the same time, he warns them, "I have high requirements for my devotees, however. One of them is that you have to maintain economic self-sufficiency and tithe to me. Another is that you have to master the basics of spiritual purification."¹³

Orr is generally recognised as the originator of Rebirthing¹⁴ although the first book about Rebirthing is co-authored by Orr and Sondra Ray (she leads what might be called the "Loving Relationships" school of Rebirthing). Many Rebirthers, myself included, have never had any personal contact with Orr. Many have never read any of his books. I will admit to enjoying the first book about Rebirthing.¹⁵ I find lots of it fun, I don't mind that it is a bit whacky, and I skip the bits I don't enjoy. I have a sentimental attachment to the first book about a method which I have developed in my own way and which has brought and still brings me so much development and pleasure and allows me to bring the same to others. Moreover, this book does contain a certain amount of useful information, although I think one needs to be trained in philology to find it. But I have not read any other of Orr's writings. As Grof so rightly says, Orr turns off people who have common sense and basic sensibility. I think I have both, and I have been turned off by him.

¹² Personally, I would only put Dryden and Yapko into that category. I have great doubts about Janov, but I know others respect him and find him useful.

¹³ *Breathe International*, Issue No 58, 1994, p.7.

¹⁴ But see Manné, 1995 on the origins of some aspects of Rebirthing theory and practice.

¹⁵ Orr and Ray, 1977.

In a way Orr is like Freud: Freud wanted to possess and control psycho-analysis; Orr insists on being a "father" for Rebirthing. This is whimsical rather than sinful and is certainly not a reason for dismissing Rebirthing.

2. The problem that Leonard Orr attracts only "superficial popularity" to Rebirthing.

Grof accuses Orr of attracting "superficial popularity" to Rebirthing. There is a lot to be said about this criticism and I want to take it apart and deal with both elements: (i) Rebirthing attracts popularity, and (ii) this popularity is superficial. I will show below that these criticisms treat disrespectfully the needs and choices of people seeking to develop and to improve the quality of their lives.

i. Attracting popularity and the new methods

We live in a time when many elements in our society are changing very markedly with regard to health and therapy. Marilyn Ferguson wrote about this quite a long time ago.¹⁶ Many new methods and attitudes have emerged in the last twenty or so years. A new paradigm is forming.

The interest in and popularity of the new methods is to some extent due to the fact that many of the older methods do not serve people's needs. They have lost people's confidence to quite a large extent. Psychiatry, for example, has a bad reputation in many countries, justly and unjustly, so many people who have ordinary problems do not choose to go to a psychiatrist. Freudian and Jungian analysis take a lot of time and money and a certain level of education; a lot of people do not have these qualifications. And at the same time more and more people are becoming aware that they do not have enough "common sense and basic sensibility" to make the way they live their lives as pleasant, comfortable, creative, rewarding, safe and happy as they would like it to be.

Besides this, the new methods are *accessible* to people who are sad and suffering and who have no confidence in, or no access to, the conventional methods, or for whom the conventional methods have failed. The ideas of many of the new methods are not hidden in language that is incomprehensible to most people, nor are they barricaded behind theories, experiences and interpretations that patients and clients have to conform to. Their theories may be simple, but they are accessible and do not seem irrelevant, and, at least with regard to Rebirthing, are related to ideas that are accepted in conventional therapies.¹⁷ The basis of many of the new methods is also the basis of humanistic and transpersonal psychology: every person is believed to have worth, to be valuable, innocent, lovable, and to have the potential for self-actualisation. Every life is believed to have meaning. The new methods are friendly and welcoming. Their practitioners are very often warm-hearted, loving and idealistic. This is the new paradigm, and people in large numbers are choosing into it.

ii. "Superficial popularity" and the new methods

¹⁶ Ferguson, 1980.

¹⁷ Manné, 1995b.

Does this necessarily mean that the new methods "attract superficial popularity". This is an extraordinary value-judgment. If it is true, it is definable. "Superficial" can be given a number. The number of people who undertake n sessions and then stop in any of the new therapies can be calculated, subjected to statistics and measured. Then we can see whether Rebirthing "attracts superficial popularity", and whether it does so on a larger scale than any of the other new methods - among which one has to include Grof's own new method of Holotropic Breathwork - which are advertised in *Here's Health*, *Kindred Spirit*, *Caduceus* and similar good quality popular magazines.

Even if Rebirthing, and other new methods, attract superficial popularity, this does not mean that the initial interest in Rebirthing is by definition superficial nor that an initial superficial attraction will not become transformed into something deeper. I would imagine that in most cases the initial interest has never been superficial: it usually is not when people are paying for their own therapy.

Finally, if superficial people are attracted, it is the people and not the method that may be criticised. When people are not superficial, they will find benefit in the most unlikely things. When people are superficial, they will be unable to find benefit in the best things.

Grof is an academic and an enthusiast about his form of breathwork. He has critical judgments about Orr and about superficial people. If Orr attracted only superficial people, Rebirthing would have expired by now.

3. Problems with the conceptual framework of Rebirthing

Grof has criticised the following elements in Orr's conceptual framework for Rebirthing: (i) the five biggies, (ii) physical immortality and death as the ultimate hypocrisy, (iii) simple-minded affirmations, (iv) financial success.

Orr's Rebirthing psychology is certainly soft psychology: it is easy to understand and even simplistic; but it has solid antecedents in academic psychology and in psychotherapy.¹⁸ It makes many of the ideas accepted in academic psychology available to people in an accessible way. There is no harm in this.

(i) "the five biggies" and (ii) "physical immortality and death as the ultimate hypocrisy"

The five biggies are "the birth trauma, the parental disapproval syndrome, specific negatives, the unconscious death urge and other lifetimes".¹⁹

¹⁸ Manné, 1995b.

¹⁹ Orr and Ray, p.58 - 63.

The Birth Trauma

Birth trauma psychology is widely accepted nowadays and academic journals such as *The International Journal of Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Medicine* and the *Pre- and Perinatal Psychology Journal* have many articles on this and related subjects. If Orr's account of it is simple, it is also lively and corresponds to reality. When people relive their birth, through Rebirthing, Voice Dialogue, any of the various forms of Hypnosis, Bioenergetics, Holotropic Breathwork or any other of the now many methods that make this experience possible, they realise that the way in which they interpreted their experience of the event has influenced their lives. As it is always AWARENESS that makes change possible, this new awareness can free them from previous conditioning.

Perhaps for historical reasons, the importance of the birth trauma is exaggerated in people's view of Rebirthing in comparison to the treatment it receives in the literature. Orr explains, "The word rebirthing was originally used because we used redwood tubs to stimulate birth memories and people literally rewrote their birth scripts in the unconscious."²⁰ He then adds three other descriptions of Rebirthing: "the rehabilitation of breathing", "any energy experience or change", "a significant emotional transformation brought about by insights, new thoughts, and understandings of life and oneself", the last two of which he attributes to Sondra Ray. These last two definitions might describe the effects of any good psychotherapy.

The Parental Disapproval Syndrome

Orr's "parental disapproval syndrome" explains that what our parents experienced as children affects the way they brought us up. This is not a controversial position to hold, even in the most conservative schools of psychology, psychoanalysis, depth psychology, counselling, etc. There is a respectable body of research which shows that problem behaviours such as alcoholism, child battering and child sexual abuse, among others, are passed on from one generation to another. Orr's assertion that the child is born with "divine" energy is supported by the increasing literature about the Inner Child,²¹ although Orr's view, like that of many of the other writers on this popular theme, may go too far and be unrealistic.²²

²⁰ Preface to the revised edition of Orr & Ray, 1983 : xviif.

²¹ For books about the Inner Child, see e.g. Bradshaw, Capacchione, Miller, Parks, Stone & Winkelmann and Whitfield.

²² Hillman and Ventura, 1993; Wolinsky, 1993; Manné, forthcoming, Chapter 16.

Specific Negatives

When Orr talks about "Specific Negatives", he means the thoughts that people use regularly to criticize themselves. "I'm not good enough," would be an example.²³ Becoming aware of negative thoughts and changing them to positive thoughts is part of the philosophy of many if not all of the new methods for therapy and personal development. Explained in a more sophisticated way, such as "individuation" (Jung), "self-actualisation" (Maslow), succeeding at having only the average amount of neurosis (Freud), it is also a part of the therapies that are more academic in their theories and explanations - otherwise what purpose would these therapies serve? All therapy is about entering a wholesome relationship with oneself.

The Unconscious Death Urge

Orr's *Unconscious Death Urge* philosophy is neither new nor particularly odd. Freud also interested himself in the death urge and the French Freudian analysts who have experimented with Rebirthing devote a chapter to this in their book.²⁴ Orr's case about Physical Immortality, which he asserts is a practical possibility, is related to his philosophy about the death urge.²⁵ There are some schools of Rebirthing which take this idea seriously. It is at the moment a requirement of the British Rebirthing Society that its members are willing to teach this. The Swedish school teaches it too. I am not acquainted with the position of the various German, Dutch or Belgian schools. The French school, however, shows no interest in this idea²⁶ and nor do I in my centre here in Switzerland. It is a serious criticism of any method of therapy or development that it insists that its members hold to certain beliefs. That risks creating a sect. There are parallels between Orr's dogmatism and that of Freud in this case too, and there is the same danger which is that a dogmatic attitude does disservice to the practice, research and development of a good method.

Other life-times

With regard to other lifetimes, there has been so much literature on this subject by psychiatrists and psychologists including Grof that it is no longer particularly strange.²⁷

Conclusion about the "Five Biggies"

I have showed clearly enough that Orr's "five biggies" are not at all outrageous, and that in fact many of them find a place in many of the conventional methods of psychotherapy, while others, past lives in particular, belong to still rather new fields of research.

²³ Orr & Ray, p. 62.

²⁴ Jallan, 1988.

²⁵ Orr and Ray, Chapter 6.

²⁶ Levardoux-Feuillette, 1989; de Panafieu, 1989.

²⁷ Lucas, 1993; Moody 1975; Stevenson, 1974; Woolger, 1988.

(iii) Simple-minded affirmations

Affirmations are an element in positive thinking techniques, which have a long history. Their efficacy in healing is attested.²⁸ They form part of the conceptual framework of (almost) all the new therapies. I call them "mental archeology". As with everything in life, affirmations can be wisely used or stupidly used.²⁹

How can it be discerned whether an affirmation is simple-minded or otherwise? I would suggest that the best way is by psychological testing. The usual way to get good quality information is through research. If we have any respect for knowledge, we will wish to avoid making vague accusations. What is simple-minded for one person may work miracles for another: such is the strangeness of the psyche!

(iv) Financial success.

Many, if not all, of the new therapies interest themselves in financial success. Where Rebirthing is different is that in its conceptual framework, the Rebirther is obliged to negotiate the fee in accordance with what the client can pay and may also work for nothing. Few people are excluded from Rebirthing because they do not have enough money to pay for sessions.

Other therapies too occupy themselves in one way and another with financial success and the problem of money and exchange, and money in exchange for therapy,³⁰ as so famously did Freud.

Conclusions about Grof's criticisms

Grof's criticisms have some value, but only at the most superficial level. When we examine them we come to understand more insightfully the new methods and understand with more compassion what makes them attractive and accessible.

TERRIBLE REBIRTHING - THE MOST SERIOUS CRITICISMS OF REBIRTHING

The criticisms of Rebirthing discussed above are prejudices. Far more serious criticisms of Rebirthing exist. If I (and the many others who agree with me) cannot distantiate the following from Rebirthing, we will have to distantiate ourselves from Rebirthing. We will have to use the word Breathwork, or some other term, to define what we do and to distinguish and separate ourselves from Rebirthers. I would be extremely sorry to have to do this.

Many of the criticisms that follow, however, are applicable not only to Rebirthing but can be generalised to other new forms of therapy.

²⁸ Achterberg, 1985; Simonton, Matthews-Simonton & Creighton, 1990.

²⁹ Manné, forthcoming, Chapter 15.

³⁰ Lockart et al, 1982.

The most serious criticisms of Rebirthing are (i) the irresponsible claims of healing, (ii) the use of hyperventilation, (iii) the inadequacy of the literature, (iv) the training of Rebirthers, and (v) the lack of information on client suitability or unsuitability.

i. Irresponsible claims of healing

There are claims made in much of the existing Rebirthing literature with regard to healing. I will quote only some of the claims in Orr and Ray. This book claims that rebirthing cures hyperventilation.³¹ It also contains claims that Rebirthing cures various physical illnesses:

"We think of rebirthing as the ultimate healing experience because your breath together with the quality of your thoughts, can heal anything. We have seen symptoms, from migraine headaches to sore ankles disappear as a result of rebirthing. Respiratory illnesses, stomach and back pains have disappeared. Frigidity, haemorrhoids, insomnia, diabetes, epilepsy, cancer, arthritis .. have been eliminated."³²

"Some of the physical conditions that have cleared up spontaneously through rebirthing are ulcerative colitis, common cold, backaches, poor eyesight, .. sinus trouble, throat and ear problems, breathing difficulties, respiratory illnesses, .. dermatitis, acne and psoriasis, chronic tension in the legs and body."³³

In the same section of the book there is also the disclaimer,

"The purpose of Rebirthing is not healing; healing is sometimes a valuable by-product. We take no responsibility for the treatment of any conditions, physical or psychological. We recommend those who have a condition they are concerned about stay in communication with their physician. Rebirthing is not a treatment and no claim is made as to its ability to cure symptoms or reverse illnesses."³⁴

The best chapter on breathwork and illness in the Rebirthing literature is Chapter 7 of Minnett's book, *Breath & Spirit*. It is, as usual with Minnett, moderate and well-considered.

Many of the new therapies also surround themselves with unsubstantiated claims of healing. This tendency may come from their over-optimism, or from a need to convince themselves of the existence of an attainable state of perfection in which there is no illness. There is a whole genre of literature - from the compassionate, moderate, sensible and well-researched to the extreme, non-researched and accusatory - which tells us that our illnesses are psychosomatic, that we are responsible for them, and that if we undertake our therapy well, they will go away.

Very many serious Rebirthers, myself included, make no claims at all with regard to the effect of Rebirthing on health, and will not make any until there are careful scientific and medical tests conducted to the highest standards to support these claims.

³¹ Orr and Ray, pp.80-83.

³² Orr and Ray, p. 89.

³³ Orr and Ray, 92.

³⁴ Orr and Ray, 92.

I HOPE I HAVE SUFFICIENTLY EMPHASISED THE FACT THAT I MAKE NO HEALING CLAIMS FOR REBIRTHING TO CONTINUE **SAFE FROM BEING MISUNDERSTOOD** IN WHAT I AM NOW GOING TO SAY.

There are indications that Rebirthing could usefully contribute to knowledge of certain breathing problems and probably help to alleviate them. Let me quote from *Behavioural and Psychological Approaches to Breathing Disorders*, an interdisciplinary collection of articles on breathing problems:

".. if changes in emotion, cognition, and/or behaviour induced by changes in breathing ameliorate complaints, then new treatments can be developed that focus on breathing-induced changes to counteract the complaints. Breathing retraining programs are an obvious example; counterconditioning techniques aimed at eliminating hyperventilatory conditioned responses are less so. ..

"The psychology of breathing holds the promise of becoming an important area of study within the new biological discipline of respiratory psychophysiology. Breathing may well be the bridge between psychology and physiology." Ronald Ley.³⁵

"There seems little doubt then, that breathing changes in response to emotional arousal. .. Events of major emotional impact would be expected to produce greater change in respiration than would events of negligible emotional impact. An explanation of the influence of a discrete, identifiable, emotionally significant life event on respiration would therefore be appropriate. Bereavement provides such an example.³⁶

"Why do some people react to bereavement with hyperventilation and suffer its physiological and psychological consequences, while others do not? Conway (1989) has suggested that it is not just the occurrence of the event itself, but rather the *failure to express emotion* that is the important factor." Ashley V. Conway.³⁷

"Allowing and encouraging the patient to cry has been reported to stabilize and slow the rate of respiration; clinical observation suggests that this effect is evident within minutes after crying has stopped, and over a longer term, too (Conway, 1989). Breathing retraining may be easier after feeling has been acknowledged and expressed.³⁸

"*The breath thus forms a bridge between the conscious and the unconscious systems.* By watching it, one can observe an unconscious function at work, learn to exclude interferences, and help self-regulating processes set it." Magda Proskauer.³⁹

"Throughout the chapters of this volume there has been a reciprocal interaction of breathing and consciousness. .. Breathing-related disorders involve complex interactions of physiological and psychological factors. Of these factors, the emotional processes associated with disturbed breathing are perhaps of most interest to therapists, but for researchers to ignore these processes might now be said to be unscientific as well as inhumane." Beverly H. Timmons.⁴⁰

³⁵ Ley, 1994, p.91.

³⁶ Conway, 1994, p.244.

³⁷ Conway, 1994, p.245.

³⁸ Conway, 1994, p.248.

³⁹ Proskauer, 1994, 254.

⁴⁰ Timmons, 1994, 288.

This collection also contains articles on Yoga and Reichian therapy, among others, the editors cannot be accused of neglecting important areas of knowledge about breathing - except Rebirthing. I think they are justified in neglecting Rebirthing because the literature is at present rather poor (see below). Nevertheless it is obvious that Rebirthing sensitively used can make a contribution in the appropriate patients, because Rebirthing can be so good at giving access to emotions and freeing them.

ii. The use of hyperventilation

This is what Orr and Ray say,

"What is called "hyperventilation syndrome" is a natural part of rebirthing. After rebirthing over ten thousand people, we have evolved a new theory of hyperventilation which is unanimously accepted by medical people who have completed their rebirthing. The new theory is that hyperventilation is a cure for subventilation."⁴¹

This is nonsense. That is the kindest one can say about it. As I said above, I make no claims that Rebirthing cures diseases and I will accept no claims that Rebirthing cures diseases unless these claims are based on proper scientific evidence. This does not exist for the claim that Rebirthing cures hyperventilation.

Rebirthing is not the only breathing technique whose practitioners may use hyperventilation. To ask a client to hyperventilate is incompetent practice in Rebirthing as it is in any Breathwork.⁴²

Why?

Because *hyperventilation rapes the unconscious*.

The great and serious risk of hyperventilation is that it can bring up from the unconscious material that the client does not have the means to integrate. This is dangerous.⁴³ Fortunately many people have strong defense systems. Their unconscious defends itself against this abusive kind of attack and instead of letting potentially dangerous material through, it produces the pain of tetany.⁴⁴ Engaging in techniques which can be dangerous in the hope that one's defence system will hold out is "cowboyism" and has nothing to do with personal and spiritual development.

iii. The problem of the inadequacy of the literature

There is, unfortunately very little literature about Rebirthing that is good: good in the sense of being informative, truthful, sensible, practical, moderate and well-researched, as well as including true, well-presented case histories, and explaining technique and methods. There is, fortunately, now one good book in English, *Breath and Spirit* by Gunnel Minnett,

⁴¹ Orr and Ray, 81.

⁴² Manné, 1994.

⁴³ See also Timmons, 1994, p.284f.

⁴⁴ Manné, 1994; Manné forthcoming, Chapter 38.

and a rather good book in French, Jacques de Panafieu's *Le Rebirth-Thérapie* - although I take strong exception to the claim that Rebirthing is hyperventilation that appears on the cover of de Panafieu's book. I am trying to produce some truthful, well-researched information about Rebirthing, in this and in my other articles and in my book and in books to come. I hope many others will join me.

Because of this lack of literature, when breathing disorders are studied Rebirthing is omitted.⁴⁵ This is understandable, if disappointing.

iv. The problem of the training of Rebirthers

There is a great deal to be said about the training of practitioners in all of the new methods, as well as in many of the older ones. The problem of how to train people to work with the breath, i.e. breathing therapists, is not limited to the training of Rebirthers. There are a large variety of problems connected with the breath, and many different approaches to these problems. In her own article in the book she has edited devoted to these problems (*Behavioral and Psychological Approaches to Breathing Disorders*), Timmons says, with regard to the training of breathing therapists,

".. in research involving a "breathing therapy" element, .. the need for specialist skills has not generally been recognized. The training and experience of therapists are either not described or are, one must say, apparently inadequate. In one recent study, for example, breathing retraining was done by "junior clinical psychologists." While it is obvious that we cannot teach someone to play the piano unless we know how to play ourselves, we may wrongly assume that because we all breathe, we are therefore qualified to help our clients improve their breathing. Many physical therapists believe, in fact, that breathing retraining of patient populations should be done only by those with a knowledge of anatomy, the mechanics of breathing, and respiratory diseases. Moreover, therapists should ideally be in themselves models of relaxed abdominal breathing. .. Finally, as Lum as often emphasized in his teachings, the single most important characteristic of therapists in this field is *empathy*."⁴⁶

Besides empathy, breathing therapists are also required to be comfortable in their breathing and not to overbreathe:

"Successful treatment depends a good deal on the characteristics of the therapist. The therapist must be able to breathe in the desired manner and to exhibit a certain amount of relaxation during treatment. .. The therapist who has practiced and, hopefully, mastered the technique of quiet breathing during stressful events will convey a good deal of conviction. Unfortunately, many therapists have a tendency to overbreathe!" Elizabeth A. Holloway.⁴⁷

Breathing therapists should be capable of supporting their clients' emotions:

"Allowing and encouraging the patient to cry .. This kind of intervention clearly makes demands on the therapist, particularly on his or her own capacity to tolerate the patient's expression of emotion." Ashley V. Conway.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Timmons and Ley, 1994.

⁴⁶ Timmons, 1994 : 269.

⁴⁷ Holloway, 1994, p.174.

⁴⁸ Conway, 1994, p.248.

Breathing therapists should also have counseling skills:

"Breathing retraining alone, without concomitant psychological counseling, may be ineffective in some hyperventilation patients." Ashley V. Conway.⁴⁹

I make no claim that Rebirthers are breathing therapists. Nevertheless the trainings of both will necessarily have some things in common as both work with the breath. I will only concern myself with the training of Rebirthers here.

Let me first tell you how I structure my use of Rebirthing:

I call what I do "Gentle Rebirthing". When a client comes to me, the first thing I do, as do most therapists, is to take their case history. I begin the first Rebirthing session by asking, "Put your attention on your breathing and tell me what happens." The client is always sitting up, comfortable and relaxed on a sofa-bed in the early sessions, and I am on a chair facing her or him. What I am doing is laying the foundation for competent and solid personal and spiritual development by teaching clients how to be aware of their thoughts, bodily sensations, emotions, instincts, intuitions, and so forth⁵⁰ using the breath as an anchor. If the material is too painful, awareness of the breathing provides a means to slow down the process so that integration can take place. What comes up is the same material that presents itself at the beginning of any psychotherapy or counselling: sadness, memories of sad events, anger at parents and other authority figures for hurts received, lack of self-esteem, and so forth. As someone else has said before me, "The breath is the royal road to the unconscious."⁵¹ I call this method of working "awareness work with the breath" or "analytical breathwork".⁵² The Rebirther needs sufficient skill and knowledge to be able to support the client in dealing with this material: *at the very least*, empathy, comfort with their own breathing, the capacity to do a great deal more than just "tolerate the patient's expression of emotion", and appropriate counseling skills (see the quotations above).

When the client has done a lot of work in this way, I invite the client, "Put your attention on your breathing, just observe it, let your body provide the rhythm, and tell me what happens." The client may be sitting or lying during the session. At this point, connected breathing may take place or it may not. It is a myth that connected breathing is necessary for any of the experiences typically connected with Rebirthing to take place.⁵³ What is important is that the therapist is not pushing but rather is letting the client's process evolve naturally. The Rebirther needs sufficient skill and knowledge to be able to support the client in dealing with the material that will come out in this way as it may be more emotional and painful. Sometimes the client will relive her or his birth trauma. It is therefore useful for the Rebirther to have elementary skill in midwifery.

⁴⁹ Conway, 1994, p.249.

⁵⁰ Gendlin, 1981.

⁵¹ See also Proskauer, 1994.

⁵² Manné, forthcoming, Chapter 38.

⁵³ *ibid.*

With really advanced clients, it is possible to play with the breath and its rhythms. The Rebirther has to be able to support the strong experiences that this brings up.⁵⁴

What does all this mean for the training of Rebirthers? Breath is a language and Rebirthers have to be experts in it. Breath is physical. Its movements in the body can be seen and indicate where energy flows smoothly and where it is blocked. The quantity of breath inhaled and exhaled, the noise of the inhale and exhale, and the area into which the breath goes: head, neck, chest, abdomen, perineum, legs and feet (yes, these too) are all significant for the process of awareness and development. Breath is also a psychological language: its rhythms speak of different states of consciousness.⁵⁵ As Rebirthing brings up Freudian material, Jungian material, archetypal states, altered states of consciousness, meditation states, and so forth, the Rebirther has to be trained to deal with all of this. When I ran my school,⁵⁶ I offered a four year training. Rebirthing was the main method taught, supported by Voice Dialogue, Jungian theory, relationships, communication, energy awareness, Bioenergetics, art, dream work, techniques of imagination and suggestion, and Regression. Students were obliged to exchange sessions every week. Those students who had the courage and commitment to finish the training really knew who they were and could take on competently the task of accompanying Rebirthing sessions.

In my early Rebirthing sessions in London, it so happened that I only worked with people with years of experience. In my training in Rebirthing, with Hans Mensink and Tilke Platteel-Deur in Holland, however, I exchanged sessions with other students. Obviously the more experienced the therapist, the better the session was handled, but I also received good sessions from students. A friend, inspired by what I was telling her about my Rebirthing experiences, insisted that I should work with her before I had started my training. She was satisfied with my work, and I worked my way through my training. Obviously I give better sessions now. Humanistic and transpersonal therapists are always intent on improving: doing the work is always a learning experience.

From this you can see that there is a real problem with regard to being categorical about the training of a Rebirther. This is no different for any other form of therapy. There is no guarantee that, even after years of training, anyone will become a good psychiatrist, a good psychoanalyst, a good analytical psychologist, a good psychotherapist or a good counsellor.

If the criteria is the length of time one has worked on one's own process, because continuous working on one's own process is a criteria for being accepted as a humanistic or transpersonal psychologist, there are problems too. We may work on our own process, but success is related to grace as much as to anything else.⁵⁷

I have no general solution at present for the problem of the training of Rebirthers, but I am working on a module system of training which may make things clearer. Others too are working on this problem. Together we will surely succeed.

⁵⁴ Manné, 1994.

⁵⁵ Many articles in Timmons, 1994 support this. See also Timmons, 287.

⁵⁶ I have now turned it into a Centre to give myself time to write, travel and teach more widely.

⁵⁷ Manné, forthcoming, Part VIII.

v. Lack of information on client suitability and unsuitability

There are no criteria in the Rebirthing literature that define which type of client is unsuitable for Rebirthing or when Rebirthing is counter-indicated. This is a problem that concerns not only Rebirthing but all psychotherapies and methods for personal and spiritual growth without exception, from psychiatry to the most unlikely modern methods and techniques. We have only to read Breggin, Goldstein and Farmer or Yapko - to take just three recent examples - to see demonstrated the problem of therapists trained in every variety of way, from the most to the least conventional, causing problems for their clients rather than treating them.

The most recent edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual Of Mental Disorders, DSM IV*, the widely recognised classification of mental disorders, recognises religious or spiritual problems (V62.89). Luckoff et al. have argued that the present recognised trainings do not equip therapists to deal with these problems. It remains to be seen what contribution Rebirthing and Rebirthers can make here and this will depend on how future trainings of Rebirthers develop so that they can treat these problems with sufficient awareness and respect.

A MINOR PROBLEM: The ten-sessions myth

The British Rebirthing Society (BRS) says in its information sheet, that after ten sessions Rebirthees can Rebirth themselves. I did a casual check at the recent Global Inspiration conference and asked how many of the Rebirthers present or of their clients could in fact do that. The answer was only one Rebirther, and none of their clients. That was the result of casually collected information, but it shows that regrettably the BRS is providing misleading information.

There is already too much misleading information and too many exaggerated claims in the new therapies. It is unnecessary to add yet more.

MARVELOUS REBIRTHING: WHAT REBIRTHING IS

I have not yet said formally what Rebirthing is.

Rebirthing is a breathing technique. In the earliest books⁵⁸ Rebirthing is called "conscious-connected breathing", "energy breathing", "a relaxed continuous breathing rhythm", even "hyperventilation" - I have already expressed my judgment about the last.

When Rebirthing is used - well or badly! - it can bring up repressed memories of suffering, the birth trauma,⁵⁹ memories of being in the womb, past-life memories and various

⁵⁸ Orr & Ray (1977); Leonard and Laut (1983).

⁵⁹ If you read French, an excellent survey of birth trauma and breath psychology from Freud to the present day has been written by Irène Abbondio (1994), *Traumatisme de la naissance et souffle dans la psychologie occidentale : manuel de référence à l'usage des Thérapeutes du Souffle*, and can be obtained directly from her by writing to Irène Abbondio, Cité Derrière 4, CH - 1005 Lausanne.

archetypal and ecstatic states of consciousness. That is a very great amount for one method to do and is truly marvelous. When Rebirthing is *well-used*, it lets the unconscious express itself safely according to its own rhythm. Experiences come up, and because the breath is used as an anchor and as a means of grounding, they become integrated.

WHAT REBIRTHING HAS ALREADY ACHIEVED

Rebirthing has already achieved a great deal in the fields of personal and spiritual development, humanistic and transpersonal psychology and even medicine.

Together with the work of Leboyer, Odent, Grof and others it has increased awareness that how we are born influences our happiness and well-being throughout our life. This has led to ever-increasing attention to the circumstances that surround birth, and to their increasing normalisation, humanisation and de-medicalisation. Further, because at least some people remember their conception and moments during their gestation during Rebirthing sessions, this has contributed to awareness of the importance of these periods of development. The consequence of this is that many people already prepare for conception, and that many couples are aware that the baby is already a participating member of the family during gestation. Also, in part because of the access that Rebirthing gives to very early memories, academic psychologists have become interested in exploring the field of very early memories with interesting and convincing results.⁶⁰

The attention that Rebirthing pays to relationships is an important contribution too. Life is relationships. Most people have relationship problems, whether it is to do with relating to themselves, their partner, their parents and children, or their work and their colleagues. Rebirthing recognises the influence of the positive and negative beliefs people have about themselves and their ability to succeed in relationships, at work, and in life in general. It recognises that these function as self-fulfilling prophecies. It provides practical means for working on these in order to create better outcomes.

Finally, we are only at the beginning of learning how to use breathwork in therapy. Rebirthing has sensitised people to the importance of the breath as a tool for personal and spiritual development.

I have given credit to Rebirthing here because it is the subject of this article, but I recognise that other new, and older, therapies have made their contribution to all of the fields mentioned above.

GENTLE REBIRTHING AND THE PROCESS OF PERSONAL AND SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

In these days of the ever greater proliferation of methods, we are faced with the challenge: can we define a good, wholesome, honest process of personal and spiritual development? I propose the following: It is important to work with a therapist who is sufficiently evolved to show us ourselves in the mirror of themselves. The therapist should

⁶⁰ See the journals mentioned in 3.1 above. See also *Primal Health Research*.

follow and accompany rather than lead. It is equally important to have a method that permits this to happen. The method should be capable of bringing up the complete range of unconscious material in a safe rhythm of self-discovery. It should give our process the space to develop with the maximum of autonomy and the minimum of external influence.

Breath is the language of the Soul. That is why these two words are the same in so many ancient religious texts.⁶¹ When we find ourselves a really well-trained Rebirther someone who can read the language of our breath in our body, someone who has advanced well on their path of personal and spiritual development so that they do not interfere with our process but truly *accompany* it, then our soul can undertake its journey in all safety and we can discover our Self.

Rebirthing, well practised, is one of the methods that can come up to these high standards. That is why it is marvelous.

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⁶¹ Minnett, 1994, Chapter 11.

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