

Wombworlds

“It is true that creative human achievements rely on a far flung, highly articulate, cultural structure, but the creative act itself is performed by informal comprehensive powers -- by powers which the man of genius shares with all men and which all men share with infants, who in their turn are about on a par in this matter with the animals.”

Michael Polanyi

Each of us emerges from the womb drum. And though it might be argued that womb drums are at least slightly different in each culture, mothers walking more or less and at different speeds, dancing more or less and at different tempos, etc. it seems obvious to me that the 24 hour multiple meters and polyrhythms of the womb drum are now and have always been a great equalizer: every child is born with a powerful tendency toward polymeter, polyrhythm, sonic complexity, subtlety, richness.

All the baby mammals have experienced brain formation by multiple meters and polyrhythms. “Many animals, including baby mice, bats, porpoises, shrews, and the shrewlike tenrecs of Madagascar, are almost constantly producing sound.”¹ The great primate family of chattering monkeys, babbling apes and jabbering humans evolved from creatures much like those “shrewlike tenrecs of Madagascar” so we mammals have been “almost constantly producing sound” and, of course, constantly receiving each other’s sounds for a long, long, long, long time -- let’s say at least 100 million years from the first constant “tenrec” or “tree shrew” twitterings to the present. Mice, bats, porpoises, shrews are all exploring the high frequencies. Bats are doing echolocation in the air and porpoises are doing it in the water. But the recent discoveries of long and involved whale songs² and low frequency communication among elephants³ suggest that mammalian consciousness and communication needs keep the womb drums throbbing in the public sphere all over the world, on land, in the sea and in the air. So three cheers for the old mammalian brain and the will to mutter and chatter and get into the groove with constant soundings!

But are we all born into a constantly sounding, rhythmically rich, sensuous and nurturing nature? No. Are we all born into a constantly sounding, rhythmically rich, sensuous and nurturing culture? No. Over the last few centuries an accelerating industrial civilization has produced conditions in which more and more children are shut off, shut up and shut down. No need to document too many of the painful ‘shutting’ processes, they are constantly in front of us. Here I want only to describe briefly what is possible when children are born into worlds that are constantly sounding, rhythmically rich, sensuous, nurturing and secure in the knowledge that nature and culture fit together beautifully.

Interestingly, some of the best descriptions of such cultures are found in a book called

¹ Science News, “Making Sense of Animal Sounds” by Dawn D. Bennett, Vol. 127, pg. 315, May 18th, 1985

² “Interview with Katy Payne” *Echology* #4:19-29, 1991

³ another Katy Payne citation, National Geographic

Learning Non-Aggression: The experience of Non-Literate Societies⁴. The main lessons from the Fore, !Kung, Inuit, Semai, Mbuti, Tahitians, Aboriginal Australians in the Learning Non-Aggression book and the main lessons from the aboriginal, indigenous, relatively classless peoples adapted to their environments all over the world (the Montagu book is just a small sampling, of course) are that constant relatedness, constant connection, multiple reinforcing patterns of cooperation, much touching, lots of talking, plenty of singing and dancing, are what human beings require to be happy, at peace, fully expressed, fully individuated. There is no substitute for being there and experiencing the processes and textures of such deep sociability in a specific deep ecology, but a number of anthropologists have tried to capture it and Colin Turnbull's account of a baby's emergence into one "sphere" after another of Mbuti society is one of the best.

"The beginning as well as the end is the forest, and the Mbuti concept of the forest and of the quality of forestness."⁵ Much of that quality comes to them 24 hours a day as 360 degrees of sound surrounding them and layered up in the different levels of vegetation supporting different sounding creatures, from the forest floor up to the highest canopy.⁶

"... the Mbuti, young or old, male or female, whenever going through the forest (except at critical moments of the hunt, obviously) talk, shout, whisper, and sing to the forest (*ndura*) addressing it as mother or father or both, referring to its goodness and its ability to "cure" or make good (from the same root, *bonga*)."⁷ And, of course, the forest talks, chatters, whispers and sings back to them. There is never a moment when the forest is not sounding into their ears from all directions, 360 degrees of 'worldhear.'⁸

Turnbull continues: "...in explanation of this usage of terminology the Mbuti say: 'Like our father and mother, the forest gives us food, shelter, clothing, warmth, and affection.' I use 'affection' so as to err on the right side for as long as I can, though the word *kondi*, which the Mbuti use in this context, is also the word they use for love and need, between which they seldom differentiate when discussing human relationships. This imagery is reiterated by every Mbuti practically every day of his life, and many times in every day. It is no formality, it is no courtesy, it is something done with joy and meaning. Sometimes there is conscious intent, to make sure that 'the forest' is alert and watchful, thus to assure protection. Perhaps more frequently it is without conscious intent, being rather a spontaneous expression of emotion. What is that emotion? Again one may detect by the gestures or facial expression, or by the tone of voice, or by supplementary words or phrases, or by all of these observable and relatable facts, that it is an emotion of sexual love; for the sexual relationship between a man or a woman, a boy or a girl, and the forest, is sometimes demonstrated overtly enough by an erotic gesture of the body, in imitation of the act of copulation. More playful youths may even specify verbally that they want to copulate with the forest. This is sure to arouse mirth amongst their companions, particularly if the accompanying body gestures are well executed; but as a motive that hardly

⁴ Ed. Ashley Montagu, New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

⁵ pg. 164 *ibid*

⁶ See and listen to *Voices of the Rainforest*, (Rykodisc and 360 degree Productions/1991) in which Steve Feld explains and evokes some of the ways in which a rainforest people in Papua New Guinea hear their world.

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ Contrast this with the increasing number of hours we spend looking at TV sets, looking into computer screens, looking at books, building a sense of owning, consuming, controlling 'worldview.'

holds ground when a youth behaves like this, as I have observed, in privacy. Then, at least, it is a private, if sexual, communion between self and forest. The emotion is sometimes more one for which I can only use the word adoration; and I do so without shame, rather with the joy felt by Teleabo Kenge when he slipped out into the *bopi* (children's playground) one moonlit night, adorned with a forest flower in his hair and forest leaves in his belt of forest vines and loin cloth of forest bark. Alone with *his* inner world he danced and sang, in evident ecstasy. And his answer to my stupid question (for to question the obvious is surely stupid) was: '*me bi na'ndura, mi bi na songe*'-- I am dancing with the forest, dancing with the moon.'"

What would it take for any of us to do that, say that, adorn ourselves that way and *mean* it? How to establish such an easy and joyful relation to the immediate environment, to nature, to the world, to the cosmos?

Turnbull describes very carefully a set of concentric spheres or wombs in which Mbuti center themselves through time as the child grows up, and how they remain centered at any given moment in present time. "Within this sphere we as individuals (or as a people, they stressed, though each talked in primarily individual terms) are normally always at the center. When we move in time or space the sphere moves with us, so we remain in the center. This is consistent with their almost exclusive usage of the present tense....and it is also consistent with a vocabulary that makes it difficult to indicate that which lies ahead (in time or space) as distinct from that which lies behind." "However, the Mbuti say, if one's movement in time or space is too violent, too sudden, one can reach the edge of the sphere before it has time to catch up, and that is when a person becomes *wazi-wazi*, or disoriented, and unpredictable."

As a movement through childhood, the unborn baby is sung to in the womb: "It is the only traditional form of song that can be sung as a solo (was Kenge, therefore, a mother singing to his child, the forest? It is entirely possible). It is composed by the mother for that particular child within her womb. It is sung for no other, it is sung by no other." Mothers-to-be sing this song often, and they take time to talk to the child in the womb describing in detail the physical and social world the newborn will be entering. Acknowledging that the song or the talk may not be well heard, certainly not understood, that perhaps the emotional tone doesn't communicate either, Turnbull states: "It is enough for me that the mother, at least, is reinforcing *her* own concept of the world, and is readying *herself* for the creative act about to unfold, giving *herself* confidence that the forest will be as good and as kind to her child as it has been to her; providing food, shelter, clothing, warmth -- and affection. That confidence alone would be an auspicious beginning to any life, and until it is proven otherwise I am not about to believe that nothing of this is transferred to the child through infancy, childhood and youth to adulthood, secure in an otherwise almost incredible trust and confidence in each of the new worlds into which he successively enters as though each were another form of that first and primal sphere, or womb."

After what is usually a very short labor and a very easy birth, the new born baby rests at the mother's breast, begins suckling within an hour or so, is later bathed in forest waters from large vines and wrapped in a special, light, sweet scented, freshly pounded bark cloth. The mother and child spend the first few days in the "*endu*, which is the spherical-like dwelling of sticks and leaves in which they live, which they build out of forest materials for shelter and protection, for warmth and comfort." And from this point on Turnbull's beautifully detailed description reveals a kind of balancing between completely secure, confidence building

experiences and the challenges that children need to grow into confident adults. “Challenge is productive and necessary to be sure, but the Mbuti ration it out in doses that never for a moment threaten to destroy confidence in ultimate success, confidence in the ultimate goodness of the forest/sphere/womb.”

I can’t begin to summarize all these balances but the main point is clear: “From the moment of birth onwards everything is done to enable that sense of security to be transferred in steadily widening and inclusive circles from the sphere that is limited to the mother’s body, to the *endu* (leaf hut), to the other *endu*, to the *bopi* (playground), to the *apa* (camp), and finally to the most inclusive sphere of all, *ndura* (the forest).” Confidently exploring each sphere, children grow up without fear.⁹ And, Turnbull argues, centered in these spheres Mbuti “face the world with such invincible faith in it’s ultimate goodness” that sustained fear, suspicion, hostility, violence are unthinkable. Hunting by adult males is violent, to be sure, but it is contained within a culture of *ekimi*, the values of calm or quiet, and a pervasive sense of the joy to be found in living.

Each of these spheres fills all five senses with a rich array of natural textures, tastes and smells, a highly variegated visual world and a total sound surround that never stops, is never shut off, never shut down, never shut out of consciousness. Each sphere is a resonant, sound-filled drum. Each person is inside these drums, a family of drums: womb drum to household drum to playground drum to camp drum to forest drum. And once we are out of the womb these world drums grow and mature inside us as well, giving us the capacity to participate in life, to converse, to sing, to play, to dance, to express ourselves fully in a dependent, interdependent, coordinated, cooperative, integrated way that brings joy to the whole person, the whole community, the whole environment, the whole world.

We are not thinking and feeling this way in the industrialized world. We are either *wazi wazi* or bored much of the time.

Pat Campbell:

As the Mbuti sing to their unborn, so do some prospective parents look for opportunities to enrich the lives of their little ones in the prenatal period. Here and there are found music classes for parents that include learning tunes to sing and rhymes to chant, and soothing massages and stimulating taps to accompany the song and poetry. Sister Lorna Zemke’s program for “pregnant parents” at Silver Lakes College in Wisconsin is exemplary in its design to bring parents in tune and in time with music they can do with their unborn babies to bond with them through music. She has developed a training program for students, too, who wish to pursue certification in this realm of music education for parents and babies. Her classes are not just music-directed, either; they are joyfully musical, chock-full of songs and chants, finger plays, and plenty of movement to music for parents-to-be. The music serves to socialize, too, deepening the

⁹ Looked at from our vantage point (i.e. a century of world wars, many genocidal massacres, increasing thuggery) this lack of fear appears as “non-aggression,” as un-real, as in-credible, as something major missing. I put this in a footnote because I want to insist, along with Turnbull and Dentan and all the authors in the Montagu collection, that we need to focus on what is present, what is there, what fills up the lives of peaceful peoples and that maintains these peaceable ways of living.

relationships between partners while also bridging [[not clear]] from one partner of parents to the next. Fascinating it is, that these sorts of programs are a direct response to the declaration by Hungarian composer, conductor, and educator Zoltan Kodaly, that children's musical education should begin "nine months before the birth of *the mother*"!

One cautionary point for parents-in-waiting. Be very careful about machines, mediated music from TV or radio, 20th century electronic tech of all kinds. Electronic mediation, mechanical contact like putting loudspeakers or boomboxes close to or touching a pregnant tummy could be dangerous, a wrong move. No one knows for sure, but it is possible that overstimulation of the fetus by mediated music could disrupt the necessary natural sequence of events and patterns. Everything in moderation, even music, especially at this delicate stage of life. Think about what is natural. Think about what people in traditional or prime cultures might be doing to transmit a love of musicking and dancing to their unborn child.

- Have you read The Secret Life of the Unborn Child, by Thomas Verny and John Kelly, NY: Dell Publishing, 1988? It takes the reader to the wombworld that was once their own, but which was lost to the time before their birth.
- If you're looking for music and teaching suggestions for parents and babies, see the tested and true Lovenotes: Music for the Unborn Child, by Sister Lorna Zemke, available via the website of Silver Lakes College in Manitowoc, Wisconsin <<http://www.sl.edu/music>>.

For the context of the precious quote from the renowned Hungarian composer and pedagogue (and other words of wisdom on the rationale and content of music in the education of children), see Bonis, Ferenc, ed., 1974, The Selected Writings of Zoltan Kodaly, translated by Lili Halapy and Fred Macnicol, translations), New York: Boosey & Hawkes.