

Book Review

Benig Mauger: Songs from the Womb – Healing the Wounded Mother

The Collins Press, Cork, 1998, 208 p., £ 9.99, ISBN 1-898256-54-3

In the introduction to her book, Benig Mauger mentions what she does not want it to be: It is not designed to give instructions or to be a medical textbook. "As the title suggests, this book is about soul wounds. More specifically it is about identifying and healing birth wounds." On the basis of her own biographical and professional experience as a psychotherapist and her work providing antenatal care and support during birth, she concentrates on the effects of birth on mothers and children.

The book is divided into two parts. The first presents various types of birth and their association with pregnancy and the situation after birth. In the second part, Mauger examines in greater detail the psychological wounds that birth may leave and the possible ways of preventing such wounds and of providing psychotherapeutic help.

Mauger emphasises the wide range of interconnections and places great importance on previous experiences and expectations. She stresses that the external course of a birth does not necessarily correspond to its psychological consequences either for the mother or for the child. In her experience, it is particularly in hospital births that seem to be relatively uneventful and that appear at first glance to have been successful that the wounds that are left may often be overlooked. Even the fact that a birth was not self-determined and did not take place in accordance with the mother's own rhythm, as she had hoped, but instead was more or less determined by the hospital staff can cause such wounds in the mother as the loss of hope. Moreover, pregnancy and birth lead to previous experiences, particularly dramatic ones, being revived. These may be the mothers experiences of her own birth, but also later traumas during childhood. Thus, during a birth involving the intensive use of medication and technical instruments, one of the mothers described by Mauger was reminded of a rape.

Mauger carefully describes how traumatic experiences are passed on from one generation to the next. She points out that the child takes up the mother's emotions from pregnancy onwards during its entire development. The emotions of the wounded mother can thus lead to the child having feelings of guilt: the burden of feeling that it has caused its mother's suffering. As a result of her traumatic experiences, the mother, in turn, may become depressive, which prevents her from becoming involved emotionally with her child and its initiatives and from reflecting it. The particular risk that this situation entails for the child has been described many times. Mauger emphasises that it is often small things, such as the general external conditions in which a birth occurs, a tone of voice or the mood of those

involved in the birth, that can have a decisive influence on whether the pregnant woman is able to take advantage of the possibilities open to her for a natural birth. "Sometimes we fail to recognise that when we are wounded, even words can hurt." Mauger describes the vicious circle that leads from bad experiences with the resultant fear to those blockages that make medical measures necessary and in turn lead to new "wounds". In this context, she particularly emphasises the effects of birth by caesarean section.

In the second part, in which she discusses her therapy concept, Mauger begins by stressing that the most important thing is to give support and confidence, to listen and to attach value to the feelings and experiences of the mother. Some mothers have no sense of their own needs. In Mauger's experience, re-enactment or the early experience in regression is part of therapy, but not in the sense of cathartic relief, but rather as a new experience: new in that, as a result of the therapist's support, it loses its traumatic aspect. Mauger places great importance on subsequently dealing with the experience creatively, either using images, fantasies of helpful individuals or other options, which she regards as an expression of the mother's own healing forces deep inside her. She repeatedly stresses the connection between her own concept and that of C. G. Jung.

It is clear from reading the book that the author is very experienced. After the work by Leboyer, Odent and Kitzinger, which have now become classics, Mauger deserves particular credit for describing in detail the wide variety of interconnections and mutual influences, in a "continuum" as it were. As the backdrop to a holistic attitude that does not completely condemn out of hand the part played by medicine, but merely critically highlights its effects, the Jungian concept proves useful as a starting point. The idea that "we must be able to let things happen in the psyche", to allow the "wisdom of the unconscious" to take effect, also show the difference between these ideas about the unconscious based on Jung and those of Freud, in which the unconscious seems to be something rather dangerous that first has to be "tamed".

The references have been deliberately kept brief, but are sometimes too brief. It would be interesting to know which French study has verified the classical investigations by DeCasper and Fifer on babies' recognition of their mother's voice after birth, for example (p. 52), and the kangaroo method first described by Rey and Martinez in Bogota deserves more than a general reference to a "doctor in Brazil" (p. 54). Other subjects, too, could be discussed further, such as the problem of the mother's feelings being adopted during pregnancy. However important this point is, particularly in view of the role of the reflecting confirmation of one's own feelings after birth, I do not believe that this proves that the fetus has no way of differentiating between its own feelings and those of the mother (p. 56). It ought to be taken into account here that fetal movements, the proprioceptive perception of which is based on the own initiatives of the fetus, can also be experienced emotionally. The tactile experiences of the uterus wall, the placenta and the umbilical cord can also be distinguished by the child from those of its own body.

However, the fact that it is able to prompt these and other discussions by no means limits the value of this book but actually increases, and particularly the extensive examples provided make for an exciting and productive read.

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