

The age of pervasive anxiety



By Dr. Richard House

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I find myself returning, albeit in a different way, to a theme I have touched on many times before ~ namely, the challenges of parenting in an age of anxiety and low trust. Anyone who works as a therapist will come up against these issues in all manner of guises; and certainly, from a psychodynamic and existential point of view, anxiety is regarded as pretty much a universal 'given' of the human condition.

So rather than anxiety being seen as a problem, or some kind of pathological condition that

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needs to be cured (e.g. to be magicked away with a dose of cognitive behaviour therapy [CBT], positive thinking or psychotropic medication), the issue is, rather, how we can dare, first, to allow ourselves to be fully aware of our multiple anxieties, and then how we can find ways of living productively with them. It might even be a sign of maturity that we are able to somehow welcome anxiety, and view it as a gift that can assist us on our journey of fully realising our deepest humanity.

Put differently, on this view, anxiety isn't some kind of inconvenient random event of creation, to be eradicated at all costs, but rather to be welcomed as a developmental and spiritual opportunity for us all. Robert Sardello's book on fear¹ is one of the best I know to address these issues ~ and we could also do far worse than to return to philosophers like Kierkegaard as our guides.²

So we need to be cautious about embracing simplistic, superficial understandings of the ways in which fear and anxiety saturate modern culture at every level, from that of the individual parent, right up to the level of global political relations. Unless we at least strive and commit

ourselves to grappling with these difficult issues, the great danger is that we'll condemn ourselves to be driven, controlled and limited by anxiety such that our lives are needlessly impoverished. One of my hopes in this brief article is to create a kind of clearing or thinking-space which can facilitate a mature engagement with the phenomenon of fear and anxiety in modern parenting culture (cf. my earlier article, 'Beyond paranoid parenting: raising children in a fear-filled age', *The Mother* magazine, 8 (Winter), 2003).

According to psychologist Robert Sardello, for example, it is simply wrong to view anxiety as some-'thing' internal to and possessed by an individual person. Yet the very language in which we speak about 'it' quite misleadingly gives this impression, and so locks us into a very unhelpful approach to the experience of anxiety. Rather, for Sardello, anxiety and fear are constitutive of *the world*, and in some sense they manifest themselves *through* us (rather than being *in* us). It follows from this that if we can find ways of transcending our parochial ego-bound consciousness, then we may be able to *dis-identify* from the anxiety which we mistakenly experience as being somehow 'owned' by ourselves (or 'our self'). At that point, we would presumably begin to perceive the extent to which we have been unconsciously projecting anxiety onto all manner of fairly normal, non-dangerous phenomena, realising in the process that our experienced anxieties are, in reality, grossly disproportionate to the scale of the problem. For as sociologist and cultural critic Frank Furedi has written, 'parental paranoia easily attaches itself to any new experience concerning children' (cf. my earlier TM article, quoted above).

Above: Chi and Sebastien

Without wishing to become *too* philosophical (though it's very tempting), it also follows from the above discussion that the very move of speaking of anxiety as an 'it' is to treat it as a kind of 'thing', rather than as some kind of necessary and indissoluble aspect of human experience. But our defences against embracing challenging human experiences manifest themselves in all kinds of surprising ways ~ not least in the very language we use, and the ways in which we habitually think about, human experience. Anyone interested in the ways in which this happens could immerse themselves in the works of Ludwig Wittgenstein's.

Another way of thinking about anxiety, and one that also goes very much against the grain of our control-fixated 'modernist' mind-set, is a *psychodynamic* one, informed by psychoanalytic thinking. In counselling and therapy, a psychodynamic approach is one that explicitly recognises the existence of a so-called dynamic unconscious that, in turn, has a major influence on our thoughts, feelings and patterns of behaviour, without our necessarily being at all aware of it. And this perspective doesn't by any means have to be all about 'sex' and base 'id' impulses, as Freud maintained ~ for Carl Jung embraced psychodynamic thinking in a way that is inherently spiritual; work that has also been extended by great thinkers like Rudolf Steiner and Robert Sardello⁴.

This psychodynamic perspective is important, for from this point of view, at least some if not most of our anxieties may have origins in experience that we just aren't conscious of (indeed, the latter can *itself* be a major source of anxiety for people locked into needing to know, and who compulsively avoid or deny the acute discomfort that can come from *not*-knowing). From this kind of view, too, then, even speaking (or writing) about anxiety becomes a very delicate business, and risks a kind of misleading superficiality that takes us away from a deep engagement with the experiential reality of anxiety, rather than enabling us fully to engage with it.

Let me give a more concrete example of what I'm talking about here. I was recently told of parents who were eagerly trying to find out how to develop their young child's right brain hemisphere. Within this parental desire is distilled, I believe, many, if not most, of the issues I wish to develop in this article. Quite apart from the narrowly mechanistic world-view that underpins such a wish, one might first ask, where does the motivation come from to want to make one's child's brain develop in a certain way? First, I guess it must be about fear that their brain won't develop 'normally' unless I, as parent, do something proactive about it. And if those of us driven by this wish were to delve a little deeper (the kind of process that often happens in counselling or psychotherapy, for example), we would very likely discover that it is *our own* unconscious, unprocessed anxieties (maybe about perceived lacks in our own developmental histories?) that are fueling this desire, and which we are unwittingly projecting on to our children ~ who are then, incidentally, left with the challenging task of having to deal with those projections (which process, again, commonly happens beneath awareness, which is where the deepest distortions and developmental damage can occur). Perhaps the most we can do for our children, on this view, is to do all we can to raise our awareness *such that we don't burden them with*

having to deal with our own unprocessed anxieties, rather than trying to make sure that they develop in either a 'normal' or (worse) an exceptional way. The paradoxical irony in all this is that *the very act* of trying to make our children develop in a way that we deem to be healthy, etc., may well have precisely the opposite effect to that which we intend. Parenting and human development are just full of subtle traps like this ~ and what I'm doing in this article is to invite us all to at least try to become more aware of them.

For me, then, this example illustrates graphically one of the cardinal errors in all child development theory and practice, and early-learning ideology more generally. The age-old, eminently wise adage 'more is less' is hardly more apt than when applied in this case. That is, if it is meaningful to speak about 'healthy child brain development' (which I'm not at all sure that it is, by the way!), then it is far more likely that a child's brain will develop healthily if we don't intrude into the child's world with our unprocessed agendas and implicit demands (what we might usefully call '*parent-centred*' rather than child-centred parenting, perhaps).

In my view, I would go as far as to argue that all early-years workers and all parents of young children should be trained in *not intruding* into



the young child's 'going-on being', as the great paediatrician and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott evocatively called it.⁵ This might sound easy, but in reality it really is extraordinarily difficult to *not* do! In a modernist, materialistic world, we are all, more or less, brainwashed into the view that *doing something* is almost, by definition, and necessarily, beneficial, and *not* doing anything tends to be neglectful. Yet young children, as Rudolf Steiner and many others have pointed out, live in a kind of *pre-modern* consciousness: that is, *the kinds of 'modernist', control-oriented rules that we routinely use in the adult world, and for older children, are simply inappropriate for the stage of consciousness in which a very young child is immersed*. On this so-called 'recapitulationist' view of child development, each and every child negotiates and creates anew a developmental path that in some core sense re-enacts the evolution of consciousness through which the human species, as a whole, has evolved over aeons.

This latter discussion perhaps touches on the

main reason why I have been so critical of the British government's early-years policy. It's a very uncomfortable position to take up, to challenge and criticise people who are making policy which they genuinely believe will help and serve young children ~ for it can easily come across as if one is actually *against* helping children to develop healthily and appropriately. Those who have deeply understood the nature of these challenges will know that nothing could be further from the truth, and that it is a paradigmatic world-view that is at stake here ~ namely, the struggle between a modernist, utilitarian view that children are best served by a busy, interventionist approach which drives forward their development in the way that adults have pre-decided is good for them, versus the approach I am championing here, which strives (note the paradox!) to do, and to intrude and impinge, *as little as possible*, consistent with the creation of an enabling, facilitating environment (Winnicott again) in which our young children will learn deeply and experientially about freedom, and that we adults deeply trust their unfolding path as they grow into the world.

Anyone familiar with much of what passes as early-years policy-making frameworks will know that those frameworks are saturated with an interventionist, quasi-schooling ideology ~ which, to return to where I started, is arguably fuelled by unprocessed anxieties at the cultural and policy-making level, and which imposition on to our hapless children can only do them harm, under the deluded pretext that it is somehow good for their development. The readers of this magazine have an urgent cultural task to do all we can, individually and collectively, to counter these poisonous, anti-child ideologies and practices.

In my next article, I would like to explore one aspect of what I've been talking about here ~ namely, what Steiner called the 'dream consciousness' of the very young child ~ and how potentially catastrophic it can be for the child's development if this crucial stage is missed or ignored, as mainstream thinking and early-years practice routinely (and tragically) do.

References

- 1 Robert Sardello, *Freeing the Soul from Fear*, Putnam, 1999.
- 2 See, for example, Arne Gron, *The Concept of Anxiety in Soren Kierkegaard*, Mercer University Press, Macon, Georgia, 2008; and Rollo May, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, W. W. Norton, New York, 1996.
- 3 See, for example, John V. Canfield, *Wittgenstein, Language and the World*, University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, Mass., 1981; Ray Monk, *How to Read Wittgenstein*, Granta Books, London and W. W. Norton, New York, 2005; and A. C. Grayling, *Wittgenstein: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001.
- 4 See Sardello's Foreword to G. Wehr, *Jung and Steiner: The Birth of a New Psychology*, Anthroposophic Press, Great Barrington, Mass., 2002, pp. 7-30; and his editorial introduction to R. Steiner, *Freud, Jung and Spiritual Psychology*, Steiner Books, Hurdon, VA, 2001.
- 5 Donald W. Winnicott's writings on parenting and child development are still very relevant, insightful and full of 'ordinary wisdom', even though he wrote some decades ago; see, for example, *Playing and Reality*, Routledge, 2005; his *Winnicott On the Child, Da Capo Press*, Cambridge, Mass., 2002; and his *Talking to Parents, Da Capo Press*, Cambridge, Mass., 1994.

Tarka and Mia. Photo by Ash Castree