Birthright


Reviewed by Kate Iadipaolo

Why review a book 36 years after its publication? Perhaps because we can look forward more clearly by first looking back: this book is doubly relevant for so many parents of young children because it speaks not only about how we ought to raise our children, but also about how we ourselves were raised. The year 1977 gave us the Census data for a Current Population Survey (CPS) called *Trends in Child Care Arrangements of Working Mothers* which “addressed the issue of childcare as a constraint on women seeking employment” (emphasis added). This simple statement discloses much: childcare is treated as a burden to the adult, as it still is, while women (and men) are “constrained” by the high cost, inconvenience, or lack of quality care centers available. Arguably the greatest merit of Selma Fraiberg’s book is that it helps us to understand this issue from the point of view of “these little ones” (Matthew 18:6), interjecting into the discussion of parental needs this simple (though jarring) statement: “the children are not faring well” (p. 154).

Many of the forces at work in the lives of children have accelerated since this book’s publication. The cultural trends are similar, though now more pronounced. Employment outside the home is the norm for both parents, with more mothers working than not – even mothers with very young children. In 2000, according to a child research data publication of the Children’s Defense Fund, 61% of mothers with children under three were in the labor force – that means millions of children under the age of three in substitute care situations. Though very often people rue the price of childcare, we very much need to focus on a different kind of cost.

Dr Fraiberg was a practicing child psychoanalyst and director of a project which treated emotionally troubled children in Michigan. In this book, she brings her experience and training to bear on the issues and outcomes related to the rearing of young children. She covers a lot of ground in the six chapters of *Every Child’s Birthright*, jumping from imagined scenarios, to animal studies, to children in institutions and foster homes, to courtrooms, to the history of welfare in the US, ending with a clarion call for child advocacy. The book is saved from utter fragmentation by the unifying thread which is Fraiberg’s basic thesis: It is every child’s birthright to be in a stable relationship with a caregiver – not only for the sake of meeting material needs, but also for the sake of providing the “nutriments” of love which constitute the basis of human attachments.

A particular strength of Fraiberg’s book is its exploration of the formation of these basic human attachments. She explains how researchers have decoded a certain “dialogue” between baby and parents that begins at birth and continues on through the ordinary experiences of childhood in eye language, smile language, signs and signals. She then surveys some ancient traditions which have bound baby and parents together from the
first hours of life. One example is found in breastfeeding: “the breast and the embrace were one for the baby,” satisfying hunger and offering comfort. When breastfeeding was the norm, mother and baby were largely bound together for the first year of life, thus guaranteeing appropriate circumstances for the formation of specific human attachment. There exists a wide-ranging scientific consensus about a certain critical period of formation: “the human qualities of enduring love and commitment to love are forged during the first two years of life” (p. 3), and yet the primary institution which has faithfully guarded proper human development, the family, is not itself well protected. Fraiberg’s commentary is still eerily appropriate: “We are living in times when there are voices which denigrate the human family and even cry out for its dissolution or recomposition” (p. 4).

The animal studies referenced in chapter 2 are enlightening insofar as their results find parallels in human experience. Human primal and instinctual responses to severe deprivations look very much like reactions among certain higher-order animal species. One must be careful, however, not to be reductive – bearing in mind that our distance from the animals is not simply the evolution of a more complex mind. (A quick note on the Freudian two-drive theory she applies to understand the interplay of human love and aggression: the resultant anthropological understanding of the human person, with all the obvious caveats given such a lens, demands a more thorough exploration than can be reasonably accomplished in a book review.)

The more compelling part of chapter 2 deals with clinical studies of children robbed of ordinary family life by some tragedy. The studies (carefully carried out by distinguished scientists, with the proper experimental controls) focused on children in two groups: those in institutions (with no stable human partnerships) and those raised in a succession of foster homes (who suffered ruptures of human ties in early development). An essential finding was that “children who have been deprived of mothering, and who have formed no personal human bonds during the first two years of life, show permanent impairment of the capacity to make human attachments in later childhood, even when substitute families are provided for them.” The degree of impairment, she explains, “is roughly equivalent to the degree of deprivation” (p. 59, emphasis added).

Lest we as a society should downplay the significance of such findings for the average child, Fraiberg points out that it is not only in institutions and successive foster care situations that children suffer. She also mentions children raised in homes with severely depressed, psychotic, or drug-addicted mothers who were essentially absent, as well as, notably, “a baby who is stored like a package” while his mother works, who may come to know many indifferent caretakers in his critical early years. This is a very bold indictment of the largely unquestioned institution we call “day care.” Child-care centers need to be examined, and even though a few might be found to be acceptable, nevertheless a child under the age of three is not well-served by them. Human attachment is not formed in a single moment or act, but by constant and repeated demonstrations of a parent’s love – by prolonged intimacy with a nurturing person. Even if one does not always correctly guess the child’s need, the important thing is that a constant person is consistently responding to the child’s expressive signs in some way. Children whose
expressive signs are not read, due to institutional limitations or other absences, will lose the motivation to communicate their needs. If such needs are chronically unmet, the child can suffer permanent psychological damage.

An unattached child forms subsequent relationships on the basis of need satisfaction in which “one ‘need-satisfying person’ can substitute for another, quite independently of his personal qualities” (p. 60). Children unable to form attachments very often become unattached adults whose lives are also marked by transient partnerships “[s]ince no partner is valued, any one partner can be exchanged for any other” (p. 53). Long-term studies of unattached children reveal they suffer deficits in their ability to form attachments, in their conceptual thinking and language, and in their impulse control (especially as related to aggression). Sufferers of non-attachment conditions also exhibit an impoverished emotional range (no joy, grief, guilt, or remorse).

Fraiberg describes the effects such persons have on society: “These bondless men, women, and children constitute one of the largest aberrant populations in the world today, contributing far beyond their numbers to social disease and disorder. These are the people who are unable to fulfill the most ordinary human obligations in work, in friendship, in marriage, and in child-rearing” (p. 70). Indeed, in the sexual promiscuity and violent tendencies of society, isn’t it possible to see the shadow of the child who was never adequately affirmed in his tender years?

Fraiberg devotes a chapter to government policy as it affects the most vulnerable families. She advises a shift in budget priorities to compensate for assaults on family life, especially on the poorest families. She decries policies that incentivize fatherless households and encourage the mothers of small children to put their own children in day care in order to work. She knows there is a role for the wider community to play, but acknowledges that the destiny of our children is forged primarily in a mother’s arms. Her book serves as a review of the state of affairs then and as a comparative tool now, but it is also a cautionary tale. Children deprived of their birthright – their right to conditions which foster their growth in love – may require “the whole colossal apparatus of psychiatric clinics and remedial education” in an attempt to help them to heal and to learn and to love. This is a very great cost indeed.

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