

Book Review

Highsmith, S., PhD., (2014). *The Renaissance of Birth: Creating bonds that last a lifetime*. Scottsdale, AZ: Inkwell Productions, 336 pp. ISBN: 978-1-939625-73-1

To begin, the author describes her personal journey that led to the doctoral program in Pre and Perinatal Psychology at the Santa Barbara Graduate Institute. She does this in two ways. The first is to describe her own family of origin and her own journey of being conceived, born, and various parts of her life.

Highsmith then shares excerpts from the research she did toward her dissertation for her PhD. She states that through her studies, including understanding the effects of her own birth and family experiences, she saw that “birth is still a relatively traumatic event for many mothers and their babies.” Her stated desire is “to share not only what I have learned about why this was so, but also to join the ranks of those who seek to create birthing environments that are safe, harmonious, and a genuine expression of the peak experience that giving birth has the potential to be.”

We then meet the women in her study, all of whom were primiparas (pregnant for the first time). She presents the thoughts and feelings from the two conversations she had with each of them and the pictures she asked them to draw of their ideal birth. The intention of having the women draw was to reveal subconscious thoughts that may or may not contribute to having their ideal birth. Highsmith asked two therapists who use art interpretation in their practices to review the pictures. Their feedback is quite interesting as is the actual outcomes of the women’s births and the simple healing process that Highsmith suggests for those whose births did not meet their ideal.

The author created a set of elements that she suggested be included in the ideal birth blueprint/drawing. She calls them PRIMES: PR=The PProcess of giving birth. I=the Infant. M=the Mother. E=the Environment. S=the Supporters. Instructions are included for individuals reading the book who might wish to use the drawing process for their own birth. Highsmith further emphasizes that drawing engages both the left and right hemispheres, and emphasizes that what is not in the drawing is equally important as what is.

The second half of the book explores prenatal and perinatal psychology principles. Since I was nearing the end of my own studies for

Certification as a Pre and Perinatal Educator with APPPAH, I found this section uplifting. Highsmith, in her warm, personal style hit all the high points and mentioned all the pioneers and founders and their many contributions and discoveries. Highsmith's sharing about these men and women and their efforts is very warm and grounded.

By the end of the book, a PPN professional has been birthed and is clearly stepping into her mission and purpose. She aptly covers many of the fundamentals of pre and perinatal psychology in such a way that whets the appetite for more exploration, which makes this book approachable by any audience (at least through my PPN colored glasses!). It is my intention to utilize many of the insights included in her book as part of my efforts to raise awareness of the importance of this amazing journey of a new life joining us on this planet.

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Book Review

Kalef, M. (2014). *Secret Life of Babies: How our prebirth and birth experiences shape our world*. Mia Kalef, publisher. ISBN: ISBN-10: 1583948031, ISBN-13: 978-1583948033

Mia Kalef's new book, *Secret Life of Babies*, is a great introduction to readers who have not considered the impact of very early life on our societies, our families, and ourselves. Step by step, she takes readers through a clear and centered path for laying the groundwork to support her basic thesis that we exist before conception and that when societies once again honor the intelligence of babies and their sentience prenatally and even before conception, the world will transform for the better (p. xix-xx).

Kalef outlines four basic principles in her book. The first principle is that babies are formulating experiences that are remembered and that these experiences are shaping their lives inside and outside the womb. She gives the example of her work with Mark, who was a thirty year old man suffering from sleep problems, fear of small spaces, and occasionally waking up feeling like he could not breathe (p.15). In sessions with him, it was learned his mother had an IUD in place that significantly affected Mark's ability to grow safely in the womb.

Kalef describes well how through individual and group work, Mark was able to "attune to his essential nature" (p.16). She orients the reader to the knowledge that our essential nature is toward growth and stability. Mark's early experiences, as Kalef points out, had imprinted him to learn the world was dangerous and that he had to "stay alert" (p.16). Mark was continuing to recapitulate this perspective until their work together gave him the opportunity, insight and empathy to see a new way of being in the world was available to him. As Kalef states, "he could learn to trust in stability" (p.16).

The author makes several important points in this chapter that are repeated through the book. First, that we are oriented toward wholeness and dynamic balance between growth and protection. Secondly, that healing occurs when we are able to name and be with, in the present moment, what is happening, and that the body aligns itself when we are able to allow and be with what is. Thirdly, that this is much more efficient

when in relationship with an empathic and centered witness, who can hold space for the process of healing to occur and guide when necessary. These points, which are illustrated in her example of Mark and others she includes in the book, are defining and clarifying for the reader as well as fascinating to read.

Another point Kalef makes in the first chapter of her book is that we are vibrational beings and we exist in fields of resonance with other beings, like in families, cultures, nations, etc. She quotes researchers such as Rupert Sheldrake to substantiate her presentation. Sometimes we are connected by our essential nature and sometimes we are connected through imprints. These connections can have epigenetic or ancestral origins. Her discussion of this point illuminates the complexity of our wounding and is well constructed for the reader to begin to see the paradigm she is developing for understanding the nature of what it is to be human.

Kalef's second principle, "Consciousness Precedes the Brain" continues to put forward her basic thesis but is less well supported with research. Kalef speaks in depth about brain construction, but it is less clear how she sees consciousness present before conception for example. There is new research in this area, coming from institutes such as IONS (Institute of Noetic Sciences) that may have made this assertion more compelling. However, her discussion of bonding and pre-conception mindsets of mother and father having an impact on development were strong.

The "Babies are our Barometers" chapter gives the reader interesting studies with which to reflect on how gestation and birth can correlate with societal occurrences such as war or suicide rates. It would have been more satisfying for this reader to have a bit more coverage on the role of technology in conception, gestation, birth, and postnatal life. This is such a huge occurrence now and the implications for how this may be shaping us are often overlooked in favor of the positive result of being pregnant or having the child. Nevertheless, Kalef succeeds in presenting a brief but solid, bold, satisfying, and healthy picture with which to hold birthing and children in general in society.

Kalef's last principle, "It is Never too Late to Heal," was a bit of a surprise chapter for this reader. While the concept she presents here is not new, it was creative and enlivening to be led in a presentation of "dominant versus emergent" culture as Kalef makes the point that by giving present moment attention to intuition and nature, new understanding will emerge for pain, disease, violence, health, and growth promotion. It was interesting to consider healing from this perspective especially as it relates to longevity. It was also easy to welcome the thought of leaving dominant cultures' worship of the rational and

conquering of nature behind in favor of, as Kalef advocates, listening to the non-verbal, and sensate world in more equal balance with the rational side of being human.

The fourth principle sets up a nice preface for what Kalef has named “The Intuitive Recovery Project” (IRP) which is a six step process designed to “detect, differentiate, and integrate” imprints that are not serving you and pull you away from your essential self (p.146). It is well worth the time just to read this chapter in *Secret Life of Babies*. Her six steps: Connection, Detection, Intention, Resources, Protectors, and Access are simply written and seem obvious and well-derived from the foundation she has set through her four principles. They each include a practice to follow as well. The exercises seem useful and potentially powerful for the reader who is ready for this type of interoceptive, self-directed process. As Kalef also suggests, it may be safest and powerful to follow this process in a group setting where witnessing and a field of support can give more clarity and empathy.

It is also meaningful and significant that Kalef emphasizes the intelligence of the body stating, “The IRP is creative and alive. The only instruction you really need is suggestions on how to sense your body. The rest of the process unfolds naturally once you trust your sensations and your body implicitly” (p.146). The issue of trusting the body is a core issue here. It is this reviewer’s experience as a clinician working with trauma daily, that trust and distrust in the felt experience is where so much pain and confusion occurs. It is a process which may require more guided support to develop the resources necessary for this type of self-directed healing, but it is useful and valuable to also emphasize as Kalef does, that the healing is intrinsically from within ourselves.

Secret Life of Babies is a beautiful journey into how our earliest experiences shape us. The title of the book (perhaps more formulated to capture a potential reader’s eye) falls short in reflecting the wisdom contained within Kalef’s work. It is a unique synthesis of stories and research the field of prenatal and perinatal psychology (PPN) has gathered for decades. Add this fine contribution to your collection of good books in the PPN field!

Reviewed by Patricia Lucas, Ph.D., R-DMT