

BEING

Elizabeth Loughlin

*Love me, - I love you,
Love me, my baby;
Sing it high, sing it low,
Sing it as it may be.*

*Mother's arms under you,
Her eyes above you
Sing it high, sing it low,
Love me, - I love you*

Christina Rossetti.

D.W. Winnicott, English paediatrician and child psychoanalyst, observed mothers and babies and extended Freudian and Kleinian theory to show how the baby develops a sense of self through the environment of the 'ordinary devoted' mother's* dependability and adaptation to her baby's needs (Winnicott, 1974; Davis & Wallbridge, 1981).

Two parts of his theoretical writings are illuminating when working with the relationships that mothers and babies bring to a dance group:

1. the notion that the mother becomes herself by identifying with her baby and that it is this identification that helps the baby to 'know' and to 'be' his or her own self; and
2. the notion of a 'potential space' that develops between mother and baby, when the mothering has been 'good enough', to provide a place for playing and communicating creatively.

Identification and the Mirroring Process

Winnicott proposed that a woman fulfils her own potential by becoming totally absorbed or identified with her new baby (Davis and Wallbridge, 1981: 132). Generally the identification is

* 'ordinary devoted mother', 'good enough mothering', 'potential space', 'holding environment', 'transitional objects' are notions referred to by Winnicott in his writings and which now are used as psychological terms.

enhanced as mother and babe have shared bodily and fantasy experiences. More specifically, Winnicott suggested that the 'pure female element' in the woman enhances her capacity to identify with the 'female element' in the boy or girl baby, a happening which he believes helps support and establish the baby's 'experience of being' (Davis and Wallbridge, 1981: 99). A further, more illustrative way to explore the effects of the mother's tie with the baby is Winnicott's use of the notion of the mother's face as a mirror.

The mother's identification with the baby means the mother's face becomes a mirror for the baby to see him or herself. Winnicott describes this identification in his last book, *Playing and Reality*. 'The mother is looking at the baby and what she looks like is related to what she sees there' (Winnicott, 1974: 131). Expressed in another way, what the baby sees when the baby looks at the face of the mother is him or herself.

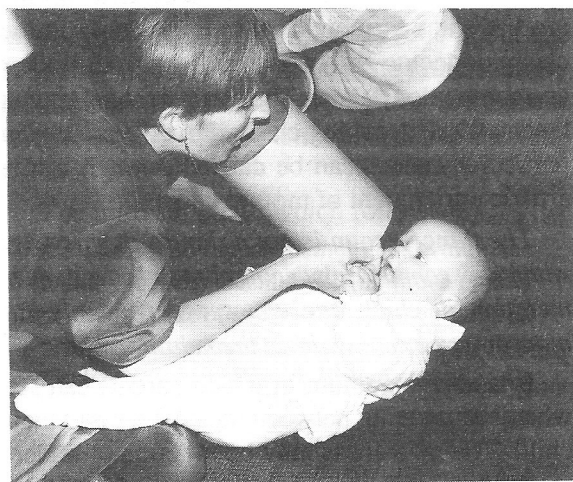


Photo: Richard Hart

At the beginning of one dance session, the mothers and babies were playing with cardboard cylinders. I observed one mother identifying with her baby in the way Winnicott describes. She was engrossed in her baby's discovery of the hole in the cylinder, and as she started the game in which she was discovering it too, one could feel that the baby saw himself reflected in his mother's face.

However there are times when the identification process is too minimal. *Winnicott describes the consequences for babies who look and do not see themselves.* He explains that in this situation the mother's face is not a mirror but something to study and to predict whether it will approve of the baby's actions. Or it may be an unresponsive face and the baby will need to search the environment for the reflection of self. Certainty of self is lost and the babies lose out on their capacity to be their own selves (Winnicott, 1974: 131).

A mother's identification with her baby may have been interrupted, by memory traces of her own difficult mothering experiences, or by anger and bewilderment about the disorder that a new dependent being has brought to her former ordered life, or by other environmental concerns, a separation or a new pregnancy.

In the dance sessions, I work with mothers and babies from five months. Sometimes a mother has seemed far away and I have observed the baby quickly scanning the mother's face, then the objects we are using, then my actions, then the other babies with increasing activity and apparent panic.

One can help the preoccupied mother to see her baby as a real person who can like and respond, by encouraging the mother to sit on the floor with her baby, to slow down, not be task orientated and to watch her baby. 'Watch his response to the feather, the bubble or the bell.'

Another situation is the mother and baby or toddler whose day may not have enough continuity of being in each other's presence. I have noticed that a few babies and toddlers who come to a dance group on their non-creche day, can be connected to me as the leader of the group, the music, the movement but not the mother's face. It may take a term for a mother and, say, an older baby or toddler to find their mirror image in each other, sometimes through movement peek-a-boo games with a cloth, sometimes through my direct explanations, and sometimes through explicit instructions: 'Go and jump in front of your child and make an interesting noise with your feet. Which jump does your baby like best?'

When the mother and baby really come to see one another they show a tremendous capacity to be enchanted by each other.

Potential Space



Photo: Richard Hart

The 'potential space' is a hypothetical space but paradoxically, at the same time, a space which can be located in time and place. In a dance session, one can actually see the rim of connectedness that encircles the mother-child pair.

In the 'potential space' can be found the transitional objects and experiences whose significance is created by the baby and which do not belong inside or outside but in an intermediate area of experiencing. Here is the place where one sees the security of being alone, the overlap of employment with another and the sense of play which then spreads into later life as a person's cultural field.

Looking backwards to the early months, the mother's identification with her baby is paramount and provides a secure and continuous 'holding environment' which adapts to the baby's needs to provide just what the baby may be looking for - the breast, warmth, touch, sounds. Babies have the illusion that they are powerful omnipotent people because everything they imagine appears as if they had created their world themselves. This sense of being gives a baby his or her sense of self. Gradually, because the baby feels so secure in the self and the mother's presence, the baby tests out mother, becomes aware she is something that is separate and that when she goes away she comes back. At the same time the mother gradually disillusiones the baby's illusion that the world is the baby's own creation by making the baby wait, by withdrawing some of her identification with the baby, and by moving back a little into her own preoccupations.

Amidst this process the baby starts to create an in between world that is not just inner life or outer reality but an in between transitional one that is imbued with meaning.

It is in this 'transitional area' or 'potential space' that there is a real opportunity for joyous dance and play: babies pulling coloured ribbons to and fro, mothers letting them disappear and reappear. Parents find that babies can really stay with the experience they offer; their babies gaze with absolute focus, while later on as a toddler they will momentarily forget the parent and run to one thing after another in the space.

Winnicott described this perplexing development: 'The naive honesty which so curiously starts in full bloom in the infant ... unripens to a bud' (Davis and Wallbridge, 1981: 21).

Even if a mother and baby show an anxious relationship, given the safe opportunity or the modelling by another adult, a mother can begin to identify with her baby, support *his or her sense of* being and tentatively start to move and play together with deep enjoyment.

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