

Introduction

This book attempts to provide a frame of reference to assist us in reflecting on who we are as human beings and on the world that we have created.

We live in a world in which we're increasingly reacting, rather than reflecting, where it is difficult to take the time to work things through. The rapid rate of technological change encourages us to respond instantaneously to what comes along, rather than take responsibility for where we are going. In this environment, anchors and pointers can help us find our way.

This book is an attempt to synthesise the literature of neuroscience, infant mental health research and practice, psychoanalysis and political and historical commentators to open up a discussion on: Who are we? What is our nature? What is our developmental path? How do we repair the elements of our development that were unsatisfactory? What societal conditions make it possible to realise our potential? And to open a discussion on: How did we get to where we are? Where do we go from here?

Karen Hitchcock, a medical doctor, writing on the current state of medicine in *The Monthly* (September 2015 p. 24, 'Too Many Pills: On lifestyle disease and quick fixes') addresses some of the themes I will discuss in this book:

A cause for many of our Western ills, organic and non-organic alike, might be found in a catchphrase that has become a cliché: that our society has degenerated into an economy. Read the papers – our main purpose and duty is to acquire and consume. At the expense of others in need; of our planet. Inequity increases. Education standards decline. We suffer existential ills that manifest in our bodies. We drive,

work and eat, become sedentary, fat, diabetic and depressed. Hospital wards fill with social catastrophes and the outcome of styles-of-life and social policy. Mainstream medicine alone cannot fix this. Real integrated treatment of our disease requires vast social action. It requires personal action: use it or lose it.

... And neoliberal to the core, we regard our population's health as a problem that lies with discrete, always self-determining individuals.

What are some useful anchors and guides that can help us navigate our current world and help us keep our focus? Understanding our needs as a baby, together with knowledge of our development to maturity over our lifespan, provides us with our psychological trajectory from birth to death. This path will include learning to love and gaining the capacity for intimacy, alongside the growth to maturity when we augment our family role and take our place in the community.

Part 1 is an exploration of our nature as human beings, our needs, and what we must have to thrive. We are inherently social beings and our interrelatedness is intrinsic to who we are. We depend on others to come into being, to be born and to flourish. Without others being there for us we do not have a self, an identity or a place in the world. We rely on others for both our physical and psychological birth. Our physical birth heralds the beginning of the birth of the personality.

I describe the main developmental tasks we grapple with over our lifespan to explain how we move from dependency to maturity. The path to maturity is difficult but rewarding. Each stage requires relinquishing earlier behaviours alongside opening up new capacities and understanding. Knowing about the developmental processes over the human lifespan can show us what is involved in reaching maturity and help us ascertain where we are going.

If we miss out on any of the developmental stages, it is possible to revisit our early years to resolve these

issues. Neuroscience, discussed in *Part 2*, tells us that our earliest years have a profound impact on our psyche and our relationships. Thus we need to integrate our early, pre-verbal years into our consciousness. I present three clinical examples of people who have grappled with the process of repairing early difficulties.¹ They were people who, like all of us, struggled with the weight of their early experience, which bore down on them and obstructed their capacity to relate to those around them. With support they could open up to spontaneity and joy and to a better understanding of the ferocity of the primitive forces that operate within.

Part 3 discusses family and society, which also have a profound impact on our psyche. Further, I offer ways of assessing the health of our society so we can better discern our needs personally and as a society. The current disarray in the world has many antecedents. I propose contributing factors to the difficulties we face with war, migration and climate change. I discuss where our society has come from and reflect on where we are at the moment, as well as possible ways of approaching the complex issues we face.

To fulfil our potential, we need to integrate an understanding of our developmental journey from birth to death and the health of the environment in which we live. This will assist us in gaining a greater understanding of the global society, and place us in the best possible position to be reflective and discerning about where we are, and where we need to be in the future.

We are not just pleasure-seeking individuals. When we are born we start developing through trial-and-error learning. What happens to the baby is a metaphor for life. Babies leave the womb where, in most instances, they have an environment attuned to their needs, with continuous nourishment and a consistent temperature. It all changes when the baby is born. He or she has to learn to suck.

¹ Two of the examples were first discussed in the *Australian Journal of Psychotherapy*, 'The Shock of the New', vol. 10, no. 2, pp. 144-153 (1991) (Kate), and 'A Stream of Sensations...', vol. 11, no. 1, pp. 35-46 (1992) (Sophia).

The baby is now an active agent in life with their parental “partner”. Similarly, the baby needs to learn to crawl first, then stand. Often the baby will stand and fall many times. Next the child takes tentative steps and experiences more falls, but eventually reaches the goal of walking and can delight in his or her achievement. This enables the toddler to be ready for the next adventure. Learning to deal with the task at hand, staying with the challenge and experiencing the reward is the template for all our lives. A sense of satisfaction results from having achieved the task and provides greater confidence in one’s ability to handle the next challenge.

“Know thyself” has been the dictum for a full life since the days of Socrates and Plato and it remains true of life today. We need to be aware of our feelings, to understand where they come from, and to use that knowledge reflectively. By combining the mind and the heart we can decide what we want to do. It can be daunting to be in touch with all the aspects inside us. It can lead to exploring our sad and lonely aspects, our guilty or angry desires. We may expose our long forgotten memories; the good, the bad, the ugly, and the profound. The reality of the human condition, that perfection is not our destiny, confronts us. All we have is the present moment. We all need to increase our understanding of, and empathy for, both oneself and others. Then we can mobilise our full human capacity to create a society and an environment that matches our needs and desires.

Note: In this book, “family” includes any group of individuals who rear children, whether they are a married couple, grandparents or single parents and regardless of the parents’ gender or biological relation to the children.