

SECOND CHANCES

Michael Trout

[Editor's note: The ILAIMH Board has asked Michael to write the cover articles for our Newsletter for 2009. This is the first of in the series. Feedback is most heartily welcome, and can be directed to: mtrout@infant-parent.com]

When the revival came to my grandmother's tiny Methodist church in Everton, Indiana that summer, nothing could have kept her away.

I'd say it was about 1950, which meant I was six. Granny had been saved 25 years earlier, and she loved to tell anyone who would listen every last detail of what the Lord did for her that day as she was washing dishes. Being "born again" it was called, and she wanted it for everyone she loved, but especially for her firstborn grandchild. That would be me.

I wanted it, too, but only because Granny made it sound so good. Granny was like that, which made her preaching feel less like proselytizing and more like sharing her very best Christmas present. She and I would work together in her kitchen for hours—her tending the boiling apples and my smashing them through the colander, preparing perhaps the finest and smoothest pink applesauce ever made on this earth—and she would tell me about Jesus, and the Final Days, and other exotic stuff that was, in every sense of the word, over my head. No matter how strange the ideas, I couldn't possibly not listen, since it was my beloved Granny who was talking, and she was an authority on these matters. If she said getting saved was *the* most important thing a boy like me could or would ever do, then it was so.

While there was an altar call most Sundays at her church, revival week was really the best time to get saved. Everybody got lathered up, and the revival preacher—being as he was from away—seemed to have special powers of persuasion. Every night the hazy combination of hymns and sweating and yelling and warning about the afterlife would, by the end of the evening, lure dozens up to the front of the church. There each would fall to the altar, the preacher would lay his hands on, family members of the about-to-be saved would hold their hands high in the air and shout, "halleluja!", and the whole community would nod their approval that another sinner had just met his match.

Not being the impulsive type—even then—I waited a couple of nights. But it finally hit me and, to Granny's astonishment and overwhelming joy, I wandered up front on about the third night. I was "born again".

You're probably guessing that it didn't entirely "stick". And you're also probably guessing that being "saved" is not the real point of this article.

The real point is to propose a peculiar metaphor for our work with infants and their families—one that strikes me as increasingly profound, the older I get.

The generally-agreed-upon grandmother of our field, Professor Selma Fraiberg, and her colleagues at the old Child Development Project (University of Michigan Department of Psychiatry), wrote, “...if history predicted with fidelity, the human family itself would have long ago been drowned in its own oppressive past. [But] The race improves” (Fraiberg, Adelson and Shapiro, 1975, p. 389).

Oh, yeah? Says who? Well, empirical observation, for one thing. Thousands of years of human experience, for another. A gigantic body of anthropological research—oddly in concert with recent advances in cell biology and physics—says so, and goes further: Not only do things improve, they get more complex in order to do so.

Why is our world built like this—with day absolutely and without exception following night? Why is hope so often lurking in the hallway, just outside rooms of despair? Answering the question as it applies to our field—specifically, why parents who have had just awful developmental experiences sometimes find ways to *not* repeat those experiences—Fraiberg told us:

And this may be because the largest number of men and women who have known suffering find renewal and the healing of childhood pain in the experience of bringing a child into the world...the parent says, “I want something better for my child than I have had” (Fraiberg, Adelson and Shapiro, 1975, p. 389).

I know. Sometimes it seems that *nothing* is getting better, that parents are virtually condemned to repeat, that whole nations are heading inexorably downward and can’t find either wisdom or hope. And it really is possible that I’ve just fallen into a pond of pure Pollyana, either because I survived open-heart surgery last month, or because I’m writing this on Inauguration Day.

On the other hand, maybe there’s something to this idea of being “born again” that stands as a metaphor for the potential that always lurks in our field. I think our work with infants and their families is—absent the hand-waving and the falling-to-your-knees part—all about second chances, about being “born again”.

We walk into these hallowed places where families live and where history has been stored. People got hurt. They carry their injuries in ways that we see better than most, and that show up especially when they birth babies and take them home and are suddenly confronted by the hatred and loss and neglect and terror of their own pasts. A tiny infant lies there, expectant, ready to be creamed by that history, or saved from it. With our carefully-worded and delicately-timed open-ended questions, we evoke that history, in the presence of the baby.

Then we get thrown out (sometimes).

But sometimes we get invited in. And sometimes we stumble across what I am suggesting is already built-in to our world: a hunger to grow, to try again (better, this time). The whole thing is much quieter than that night in my Granny's church, but the effect is similar: A parent stands up and says, "No more" to the past, and starts over. A mom whose family has orchestrated the loss of every daddy of every little girl before age one finds a way to squeak out the story. She notices that she is just about to toss out *her* boyfriend, just as *her* baby girl reaches the age she was when *her* daddy left (and the age her mother was when *her* daddy left, and so on, back several generations). And for reasons that sometimes seem like magic—or are so subtle that they go unnoticed, for a bit—she decides to change something. She tells her boyfriend he isn't going *anywhere*: "And how do you think that would make our little girl feel?! Just because she's just a baby doesn't mean you can just walk out on her and have her not notice it!" A long-established theme stops.

I know all the clinical reasons—most richly, the psychoanalytic ones—for such moments. But the wondering I am doing on this day is at the metaphysical level. Is there a driving force in this universe for change, or even for upward movement? Are there always second chances? Is being "born again" always possible?

What would it mean to our clinical practice if we believed it to be so?

I'm as prone to lost hope as the next guy, I suppose. But, at the core, I really believe we get second chances. Morning keeps arriving, right on schedule, after even the darkest night. Go figure.

Fraiberg, S., Adelson, E., and Shapiro, V. (1975). Ghosts in the nursery: A psychoanalytic approach to the problems of impaired infant-mother relationships. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 14(3), 387-421.

[Mr. Trout is the Director of the Infant-Parent Institute in Champaign, and the author of Baby Verses: The Narrative Poetry of Infants and Toddlers (2008) and The Jonathon Letters (2005). He was the founding President of both the Michigan Association for Infant Mental Health and the International Association for Infant Mental Health (before it joined with WAIPAD to create the WAIMH). He is a former President of the ILAIMH.]