

**Rebirthing:**  
**the transformation of personhood  
through embodiment and emotion**

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## Thesis Declaration

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Elise Carr

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the nature of personhood, embodiment and emotion based on twelve months fieldwork within a breathwork/rebirthing community in 2008–2009. The fieldwork included a nine-month rebirthing training program that is the primary focus of this thesis. Rebirthing, a breathing technique reputed to release repressed material and stress from the body, emerged from California in the 1970s as a modality of the New Age. The six participants of this rebirthing training consistently expressed a desire to re-examine their lives, and viewed the training as an opportunity to redefine themselves. They saw the rebirthing training as an opportunity to develop a deepened sense of agency which would facilitate transformations of relationships with themselves and others. The subjective nature of this transformation relies on a particular understanding of personhood in rebirthing discourse; one that is self-aware, reflexive and flexible, and, thus, amenable to this process of change. Employing a narrative perspective I examine the transformative journeys of these six participants as they undertake to challenge their own self-perceptions, values and beliefs as they expose and unravel their life histories. Central to this thesis are two questions. How does the practice of rebirthing impact on notions of personhood; and what role do embodiment and emotion play in the construction and reconstruction of the model of personhood central to rebirthing practice?

The practice of rebirthing is situated within a set of assumptions and presuppositions about the nature of personhood, the mind and body, spirituality, life and death. Rebirthing is specifically embedded in the precepts of 'thought is creative,' 'the self as a spiritual being,' and 'holistic health'. Based on a body constructed of energy, an energy that is cosmologically universal, personhood, in this context, is understood to be both individual and relational, autonomous yet 'porous.' This concept of an energetic body renders embodiment and emotion mutually constitutive. The specific breathing technique of rebirthing is seen as the key tool for accessing somatic and emotional information from the body. Through the rebirthing process the individual is understood to be capable of recalling and reconstructing their past, transforming beliefs and values that enable them to move into the future with a greater sense of agency.

The rebirthing training program is constructed to follow the life course sequentially, from conception and birth to death. My research illustrates the subjective and individualised nature of the transformative process of the rebirthing training program. Each chapter explores the unfolding of individual stories, experiences and understanding of the nature of personhood within the rebirthing context. These chapters chart the gradual transformation of personhood that takes place through the participants' embodied and emotional experiences of the rebirthing training. I argue that by interrogating how personhood is formulated and transformed in the specific cultural setting of a rebirthing training we gain a highly nuanced and deeply intimate insight into how people actively shape and participate in their social world.

## **‘It’s like finding a whole new person in there’**

*In my first rebirthing session I didn't know what was going to happen. When I got down on the mattress and started breathing, I was amazed at what came up. It was more of a sensation really, getting in touch with myself; not being happy with the old me and not quite knowing what the new me's going to be. It scared me for a while, looking at really deep emotional stuff. It's like finding a whole new person in there. I'm looking to change some stuff in my life; what the future is going to be. And I want to be happier in myself and my relationship. After the rebirthing session I realised that I could do it step by step rather than having to swap immediately from old to new.*

This quote is from a participant of a nine-month rebirthing training program that formed the basis of my Doctoral fieldwork. Whilst rebirthing is described as ‘a safe, simple, breathing technique’, it is deeply embedded within a particular framework and nexus of theory and practice. Rebirthing is, most commonly, facilitated in private one-on-one therapy sessions. However, nationally and globally, rebirthing training courses are offered for intensive training in the philosophy and practice of rebirthing. These words of Gaylene’s, spoken at the beginning of the training program, encapsulate the essence of this thesis, which is based on an analysis of rebirthing and a process of transformation at a personal level, one that takes place over time. Gaylene’s comments raise several issues, which will be explored by critically analysing this process of change, that are based on certain assumptions about and understandings of personhood, embodiment and emotion that facilitate the desired transformation within the rebirthing framework. This research addresses two questions: how does the practice of rebirthing impact on notions of personhood; and what role do embodiment and emotion play in the construction and reconstruction of personhood?

I was first exposed to rebirthing in 1988 through self-development programs and reading. Although I undertook a rebirthing training course at that time, it was for the purpose of gathering information rather than to become a practitioner. I continued to have occasional exposure to rebirthing until 2006, when I was drawn back to rebirthing as an adjunct to the resolution of the issues I was confronting at the time. I retrained and developed a deeper interest in the qualities of rebirthing and its impact on people’s lives.

1 *'It's like finding a whole new person in there'*

Having experienced a conservative Christian rural upbringing followed by a career in nursing, there are moments when I am still bemused that I should be so interested and involved in rebirthing—a modality that is generally regarded with suspicion, disbelief and amusement. Yet, over the years, I have been involved in rebirthing and witnessed profound and subtle changes in people and their lives, myself included.

A wide variety of people have undertaken rebirthing and many have chosen to do the training program. In Australia, these people are primarily white and middle class from across a wide range of ages, levels of education, careers, and life experiences. Albanese's (2007:236-237) description of the adherents of the New Age movement can equally apply to the rebirthing cohort as:

middle-aged, sometimes, young, usually urban, and overwhelmingly female [also] middle-class and upwardly mobile, as better educated than average, and not particularly alienated from society...still, a strong working-class component exists [although] quieter and less noticeable.

Although alternative and complementary healing modalities are widely used within developed countries, they remain relatively unstudied and there is negligible academic work done on the particular modality of rebirthing. Rather than focussing on the mechanistic approach of biomedicine and the intellectual focus of psychoanalysis, rebirthing reaches into the embodied experience of the client. This way, by drawing on their somatic and emotional responses, the client is enabled to seek their own answers rather than being influenced or advised by the practitioner. What is most interesting in rebirthing practice is the wide range of people it attracts, the lack of a uniform or predictable trajectory of experiences, and the idea that their experiences of rebirthing and transformation are contingent upon their own agency. That is, the rebirthing experience is understood to be organically generated by each individual. Each rebirth is seen to represent a unique subjective experience and its flexibility and fluidity provides opportunities for people to make choices and changes in respect to their own circumstances.

Rebirthing relies on a particular notion of personhood to be effective, a personhood reflective of modernity Giddens (1991:75) and perceptions of the self 'as a reflexive project, for which the individual is responsible...we are...what we make of ourselves'

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Giddens (1991:75). Hedges and Beckford (2000:174) propose that Giddens deems that this 'reflexive project' 'is made necessary by the erosion of traditions and community in late modernity.' This making of the self is aided by the presence of a 'cultural supermarket, at which selves pick and choose who they are from a vast array of potential self-identities and self-justifications' (Mathews 1996:718). I propose that rebirthing is one such product that people choose, from a desire to re-examine their lives, as an opportunity to redefine themselves as persons and to move into their future with a deepened level and sense of agency. The ultimate goal is 'self-actualisation' of which the 'moral thread ... is one of *authenticity*...based on 'being true to oneself' (Giddens 1991:78, italics in original).

Employing a narrative perspective, the thesis is structured temporally around the transformative journeys of the participants in which the nature of personhood, embodiment and emotion is explored. By utilising a narrative style, the stories of the participants enable readers to 'feel' or understand the process of the journey of rebirthing. My dual role as insider and researcher to the rebirthing milieu, is to unravel and interrogate the process of rebirthing, an alternative modality that has not previously been the subject of academic analysis.

Although there are ample insider accounts of a range of experiences and therapies within the New Age, they tend to be autobiographical or testimonial, and lack academic rigor. Cohen (1994:132) asserts that '[h]istorically, anthropology has privileged the collective and dogmatic and neglected the individual and experiential, as a consequence of its general neglect of selfhood and self consciousness'. This thesis, through focussing on the individual and experiential, provides a deeply intimate and personal account of understandings of, and subsequent transformation of personhood. Through an academic exploration of the temporal transformative experiences of this group of people through their own personal narratives, a 'thick' ethnography emerges that is rare in academic literature. This new perspective on an alternative therapy will provide a valid and valuable contribution to the literature.

I have elected to use a narrative style as a form of critical engagement as this thesis is an ethnography of experience in which the 'self and personal voice are central [via] the

testimonial use of language' (Skultans 2008:239). The process of the rebirthing training is largely constructed around the accounts and reflections of the participants—their narratives. Narratives are the stories of individual people and through their telling, they not only reveal the impact of the past, but also the individual's connections and meanings that result in their particular story as related to their social worlds. What are revealed in the process are the opposing needs of the person and the expectations of their social milieu. Ultimately, '[w]ho one is can only be answered by recounting one's life story' (Skultans 2008:10).

These accounts are authentic—they are powerful, based on personal experience and unrehearsed (Skultans 2008:176). Although I selected which narratives I use, I have endeavoured to reproduce them exactly as uttered thus retaining the power within the voices. The very words of the participants reflect the embodiment and emotion that is grounded in *their* reality of *their* experiences. It is through narrative that the entire person may be more deeply penetrated and understood employing embodiment and emotion as primary tools to reveal the complexity of the interrelational body-self and social body.

Accordingly, I draw on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over twelve months which included a nine-month rebirthing training course. In doing so, I learnt that the personal nature of this transformation relies on a particular view of personhood, one that is self-aware, reflexive and flexible, and thus, accessible to this process of change. To unravel this process, I analyse and explore three main threads that are interwoven throughout this thesis—personhood, emotion and embodiment. I explore the negotiation and renegotiation of relationships, with the self and with others, drawing primarily on the experiences, realisations, actions and changes within a small cohort of people undertaking the rebirthing training program. Through the course of the training, the journeys of these participants are followed as their perceptions of self are challenged. Rebirthing, and the change elicited through the training, are embodied processes; the participants drawing on emotional and sensory experiences of the body resulting in a gradual unfolding and emerging. With new choices and increasing agency, the participants facilitate change that, ideally, results in a 'new' transformed self. In this thesis, I will analyse concepts of 'person' in rebirthing practice, drawing on issues of self-

awareness, identity and agency, relationality, and the idea that each person has the will and power to make choices and effect change in their own lives.

## **Rebirthing: a simple breathing technique**

Rebirthing is described as a simple breathing technique that, under the guidance of a rebirthing practitioner, 'helps to clear out any unwanted negativity from the past' leaving the client 'refreshed, revitalised and renewed' (Fernance 2003:208)<sup>1</sup>. Around this simple premise, however, a complex history and background exists that frames and informs rebirthing practice.

There is no official definitive history of rebirthing. Rebirthing's originator, Leonard Orr, produced several texts that posited concepts with no reference to their sources. He also drew on a variety of seemingly disparate spiritual and theoretical sources including Theosophy, psychoanalysis, Eastern spirituality, New Age spirituality and the work of Frederick Leboyer<sup>2</sup>. To understand the major concepts of rebirthing requires exploring a diffuse and varied set of ideas and practices that have arisen from a broad range of sources. Therefore a wide variety of sources will be drawn upon for this thesis<sup>3</sup>.

In the United States of America, from the late 1960s to the early '70s, a counterculture began to emerge from within the post-war generation. This counterculture took many forms and labels, such as 'the Age of Aquarius', 'flower power', hippies, the anti-war movement and others. Levin and Coreil (1986:890) describe this movement as comprised of younger Americans who, disaffected by the established social and cultural structures, 'attempt[ed] to take control of and reform a variety of political, economic, and cultural institutions'. This movement emerged in a number of forms and subgroups; from hippie communes to new spiritual movements drawing on both western and eastern mysticism and philosophy, ancient and contemporary, experimentation with drugs, (from magic mushrooms to LSD), and a new approach to health and wellness. This 'holistic'

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<sup>1</sup>Robyn Fernance: Australian rebirthing practitioner, trainer and author.

<sup>2</sup> A French obstetrician, Leboyer introduced new birthing techniques described in his book *Birth Without Violence*.

<sup>3</sup> For ease of identification, all academic sources will be referenced as usual. Any other sources such as rebirthing manuals, breathwork and self-help texts and others, will be identified as such, either as footnotes or within the text of the thesis.

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healing, advocating 'the unity of body, mind, and soul (or spirit)' (ibid.:891), included a range of complementary and alternative therapies and healing modalities beyond those available from the mainstream medical system. A set of idioms have come into use reflecting the New Age generation of new ways of being in the world, and through the goals of 'inner peace, wellness, unity, self-actualization, and the attainment of higher consciousness' (ibid.:889), those embracing the New Age are seeking 'social change via personal transformation' (ibid.:889) rather than through the established social and cultural networks. Such personal transformation, it is believed, begins with the acknowledgement that 'we are spiritual beings having a human existence'<sup>4</sup> and that 'to experience the 'self' is to experience God in an array of terms such as 'Source', 'inner child', 'inner spirituality' and more (Heelas 1996b:19). In this context, this personal transformation is achieved through 'self-help, self-awareness, and self-knowledge [driven by] compelling precepts [such as] "be yourself," "be true to yourself," and "find out who you are"' (Whittaker 1992:197).

The primary premise upon which the New Age evolved is the notion of self-spirituality: knowledge of the self through, initially, altered states of consciousness as may be experienced through drug use<sup>5</sup>. Interest in other practices and modalities grew where notions of the self could be explored and recreated through safer domains. Particular interest focussed on breathing techniques such as 'yoga, qiqong and other Eastern breathwork techniques' (Minett 2004:95)<sup>6</sup>. Two specific breathing modalities emerged at the same time in the USA: rebirthing and holotropic breathwork.

The first is rebirthing, that is the source for the mode of breathwork of this thesis. Rebirthing emerged from California and is a breathing technique that reflects the basic common precepts of the New Age. The original form and philosophies of rebirthing are

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<sup>4</sup> Full quote: 'we are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience'; attributed to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin (1881-1955), French geologist, priest, philosopher and mystic.

<sup>5</sup> Well-known practitioners of psychedelic drug use in the early '60s—Timothy Leary: clinical psychologist, Harvard University, and Stanislav Grof: transpersonal psychiatrist, Johns Hopkins University. Drug use continued to play a role in some communities of the New Age, particularly psychedelics and marijuana.

<sup>6</sup> Gunnel Minett is a psychologist and rebirther/breathworker residing in Cambridge, UK. Minett was instrumental in the formation of the International Breathwork Foundation and hosted the first Global Inspiration Conference for breathworkers in 1994.

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attributed to Leonard Orr, who was born in 1938 in Walton, New York. During his high school years, Orr became a born-again Christian and at Geneva College, Beaver Falls, he majored in Bible studies and psychology with the intention of becoming a preacher. However, Orr (Thresholds 2000:1)<sup>7</sup> describes having 'felt a calling to be a minister of the unchurched'. Following this message, Orr undertook a wide range of research interests including those of New Thought philosophy, a spiritual movement that originated in New England in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century that incorporated both Hindu and Buddhist thoughts with those of the Christian West.

In 1962, having no formal education in psychotherapy, Orr began his personal experiences of what he later named rebirthing. He realised that spending time in hot tubs or saunas led to such a degree of relaxation and surrender that strong emotions were triggered. Orr describes linking these emotions to memories of past personal traumas, ultimately bringing to his consciousness realisations that were 'valuable and liberating' (Thresholds 2000:1), and he suggested that each of these realisations freed up his breathing. During the years 1965 to 1967, Orr 'unravelled [his]'death urge" and by 1968 he described having 'conscious birth memories' (ibid.:2). He eventually realised that the hot tub was not necessary for this specific breathing technique and equivalent results were achieved through 'dry' rebirthing.

After experimenting with various breathing patterns to ascertain how to stimulate emotional reactions, Orr identified the 'conscious connected breathing pattern'<sup>8</sup> to be the most effective, which is described as 'a relaxed continuous breathing rhythm in which the inhale is connected to the exhale in a continuous circle' (Orr & Ray 1977:xvii)<sup>9</sup>. In other words, the natural pauses between the inhale and the exhale are over-ridden, hence the term 'conscious connected breathing'. In addition, the exhale remains totally relaxed; the natural relaxation of the diaphragm and intercostal muscles to the resting position facilitating the transference of air out of the lungs. This breathing technique is undertaken for a one-hour duration and:

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<sup>7</sup> Thresholds Quarterly is a magazine produced by the School of Metaphysics, Webster Groves, Missouri Centre. In 2002, the magazine became an annual event.

<sup>8</sup> A breathing technique derived from '*Pranayama* – the Indian Yoga of breath – which employs a connected breathing rhythm to produce an altered state of awareness (Drury 2004:113).

<sup>9</sup> Sondra Ray, a contemporary and fellow pioneer of Orr's, co-authored the seminal work *Rebirthing In the New Age*.

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involves therapists guiding clients in maintaining throughout the session a continuous uninterrupted breathing rhythm with no pauses between transitions of exhale and inhale, with inhalation being active and involving expansion of the upper chest...exhalation should be a transition to complete letting go and relaxation of respiratory muscles. (Lalande, Bambling, King & Lowe 2012:2)

Orr named the process 'rebirthing', as the memories of his birth seemed to evoke the strongest experience. In 1974, Orr continued his experimentation by guiding others through the process and commenced a training program in 1975.

Czech psychiatrist Stanislav Grof developed a second form of breathwork in the USA during the '70s named Holotropic Breathwork. Whilst the breathing component of this modality resembles the breathing component of rebirthing, Holotropic Breathwork places greater emphasis on the breather 'listen[ing] to their body's signals, and act[ing] them out in sounds and movement'. Furthermore the use of music, often played loudly, is used 'to help stimulate and amplify the emotional reactions' (Minett 2004:122).

Over the years, practitioners of breathwork have learnt their craft from one of these two strands. However, there remains a crossover and some practitioners who call themselves rebirthers<sup>10</sup> draw on some or all aspects of Holotropic Breathwork. For many, this has included the introduction and support of cathartic expression, encouraging a more strenuous modification of conscious connected breathing, the use of evocative music, and a range of verbal and physical interventions by the practitioner. As such, over the years, rebirthing as a modality has been shaped and formed by the specific interests, philosophical and spiritual beliefs and practices of its various practitioners, who have each introduced their own particular take on rebirthing. In this way, the flexibility of the modality is demonstrated as dependent on the individual preferences of the practitioner. However, irrespective of the personal variances in the practice of rebirthing, there are certain premises of the rebirthing modality that remain constant, which I shall illuminate in Chapter Two.

Extreme practices have been utilised in the name of rebirthing, sometimes with disastrous consequences, as in the case of ten-year-old Candace Newmaker who was

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<sup>10</sup> A rebirther is a trained practitioner who guides the rebirthing session. The one being rebirthed, usually the client, for the purposes of this thesis will be referred to as the rebirthee. Some texts use the label breather for the rebirthee.

asphyxiated in 2000 during a holding session, labelled rebirthing, of attachment therapy (King & Begley 2000:65; Mercer 2002:309). This event was the key subject of a 2007 episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*<sup>11</sup>. Through events and representations like this, rebirthing has attracted a reputation as a fringe modality in the alternative and complementary therapies that a 2011 episode of Judith Lucy's *Spiritual Journey*<sup>12</sup> did little to challenge. In the third episode, a rebirthing practitioner introduced Judith to the modality by placing her face down in a bathtub using a snorkel to breathe. Such negative representations have had an impact on how people react to 'rebirthing' as a healing modality. The word 'rebirthing' itself evokes reactions from people with responses ranging from 'that sounds interesting' to 'I've already done that once, I don't want to go there again'<sup>13</sup>. Because of the long-standing and multiple negative constructions, many practitioners are electing to use the generic term 'breathwork' as an alternative to 'rebirthing'. Margaret, the facilitator of the rebirthing training during my fieldwork, retains the label 'rebirthing' out of respect for its origins.

The rebirthing model that is the focus of this thesis is the conscious connected breathing modality first developed by Orr. During a breathing session, which usually spans one hour, the focus of rebirthing is on the somatic and emotional experience that potentially may lead to mental and/or spiritual insights. An experienced practitioner sits with the breather to provide constructive support, firstly by assisting the breather to maintain the conscious connected breathing, and secondly to assist them in finding their own insights. Orr did not produce a definitive model for rebirthing, and the practice was passed from teacher to pupil via experiential training programs, such as the ones that I attended.

### **Central Principles: creativity, holism and spiritual selves**

*Their spirit runs the program, not the rebirther. Rebirthing is a process of their own self-determination. (Quote from Margaret, facilitator of the rebirth training program)*

Due to the diffuse, flexible, and fringe nature of breathwork in general, it is not possible to estimate the varieties of breathwork or numbers of practitioners in Australia or

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.tv.com/shows/law-order-special-victims-unit/cage-913605/>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.abc.net.au/tv/judithlucy/stories/s3248543.htm>

<sup>13</sup> From interviews undertaken during fieldwork.

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worldwide. Despite a variety of national and international networks, many practitioners do not subscribe to these networks. Currently, there are three government accredited rebirthing/breathwork training programs based in Australia. To my knowledge, there are no such accredited trainings elsewhere in the world. Since the mid-2000s, psychologist Lloyd Lalande has been developing a therapeutic model based on conscious connected breathing using the basic principles of rebirthing, and has recently completed his Doctorate at the Australian Catholic University, Queensland.

Whilst there is no one definitive model of rebirthing, its various forms are underpinned by common principles. First and foremost is the belief that 'thought is creative'. Orr and Ray (1977:52, italics in original) presented this as '[T]he absolute truth [as] *the thinker is creative with his thoughts*'. The concept that the individual can influence the course of their lives as a result of their thoughts holds great credence, not only in rebirthing but also in the self/personal development field. The second principle is that of the self as a spiritual being. For Orr and Ray, rebirthing is 'about real human lives being transformed by spiritual truth' (ibid.:xii). Third, rebirthing encompasses an approach to life and health that is holistic. This approach reflects the belief in the interdependence of mind, body and spirit in comparison to 'the much noted Cartesian dualism that separates mind from body, spirit from matter, and real...from unreal' (Scheper Hughes & Lock 1987:6-7). These three principles interweave and interconnect by drawing on the notion of people as spiritual beings privileging the self and with a connection to the earth, questioning aspects of contemporary culture, and invoking a desire for self-determined health that is reflected in a holistic approach to health and wellbeing. These principles evolved from a wide range of spiritual sources, psychological influences, and bodies of knowledge and practices that will be explored in the next section.

### ***Thought is creative***

Historically, the concept of the 'power of thought' has a long pedigree, particularly within spirituality movements. From the settlement of America, occultism and metaphysics evolved alongside the Puritan-Anglican Christian religions. Inherent in spiritual practices of occultism and metaphysics is the notion of the power of the human mind to affect outcomes in a person's life. Occultism, where "the "mind" imagines itself into the material

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world with symbolic objects, gestures, and ceremonies,' (Albanese 2007:179) differs from metaphysics, which utilises the "mind"...by employing thought or language as its tool' (ibid.:179). The emergence of Spiritualism in the 1800s with the ability for mediums to access trance-like states and converse with spirits, clairvoyance and such practices gained a degree of popularity as an alternative to Christian practice and ritual. The Theosophical movement in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century translated such alternative spiritual practices into coherent spiritual organisations<sup>14</sup>.

By the 1890s, an alternative mental science, New Thought, emerged largely as theosophy without the occult element. It was this movement that significantly influenced Orr (Thresholds 2000:2). Quimby (1802-1866), a mental healer within the New Thought movement, attested that 'erroneous thinking was the cause of disease' (Albanese 2007:160). This 'assumption that mind is fundamental and causative' (Ellwood 1973:79) was adopted by Orr (Orr & Ray 1977:53) and reworked as 'thought is creative'. This principle is relayed throughout rebirthing training accompanied by the teaching of affirmations<sup>15</sup> to assist in changing repetitive thought patterns that a person is argued to have developed over the course of their life (ibid.:65).

### ***Self as a spiritual being***

A second key tenet of the New Age movement, and subsequently rebirthing, is the notion that the self is a spiritual being. This train of spiritual thought can be traced back to Gnosticism, which first arose in the late Hellenic period in response to Roman excesses. Gnosticism provided salvation through the recognition of the 'divine spark within—the fragment of uncreated spirit violently broken off from the divine estate—and learning how to master its mysterious force' (Tumber 2002:2). This concept was utilised by the emerging spiritual movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century (as above) creating new forms of spiritual practice. Likewise, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the New Age movement began exploring alternative spiritual practices, supplanting more formalised religious

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Madam Blavatsky, instrumental in the early years of Theosophy, travelled to Central Asia and the Middle East to inform and develop her spiritual philosophy (Tingay 2000:38).

<sup>15</sup> An affirmation is a positive statement created in opposition to a negative thought pattern. Through repetition, verbally or written, the negative thought is eventually replaced by the positive thought.

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conventions. Tacey (2003:13) describes this 'decline in organised religion' as a response to '[r]eligious dogmas, ideas, assumptions and attitudes [being] seen as artificial and socially constructed as vehicles of social ideology rather than of divine revelation' (ibid.:35-36). Rather than focussing on an external deity of institutionalised religion, the focus was redirected to finding the spirit within. In this way, '[s]pirit is felt to be holistic and urging us towards wholeness and completion, whereas religion is perceived to be promoting perfection, one-sidedness and imbalance' (Tacey 2003:31)<sup>16</sup>.

Rebirthing has incorporated the self as a spiritual being as a major philosophical position, reflecting the common viewpoint' within the New Age movement of 'the need to find the God/self within' (Albanese 2007:229) and providing a means to facilitate healing. The self as a spiritual being is paramount, as it is this spiritual being that intrinsically knows and guides healing. As Heelas (1996b:82, italics in original) proposes, the 'spiritual realm is intrinsically healing. Healing comes from within, from one's *own* bodily[*sic*]-as-spirituality/energy; from one's *own* experience of the natural order as a whole'. Ultimately, within rebirthing, the self as a spiritual being is understood to be the authority. This is a spirituality that 'enables one to explore one's *own* inner Self; which allows one the freedom to *be* oneself, which enables one to discover one-self, rather than handing the task over to others' (Heelas 1996b:172-173, italics in original).

### **Holistic health and nature**

The third major theme in rebirthing, holistic health and nature, also has a long pedigree. Desmond, McDonagh and O'Donohoe (2001:248) propose two forms of counterculture: the revolutionary and the aesthetic. '[T]hese represent different space/time responses to living with the otherwise intolerable reality of the crushing power of the mainstream'. Typical of revolutionary counterculture was the Frankfurt School during the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A collection of critical theorists, the avant-garde and others joined forces to champion the rights of the 'down-trodden' via revolution. An example of an aesthetic counterculture was formed in 1900 by a group of intellectuals and academics at Ascona, Switzerland.

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<sup>16</sup> However, whilst 'the rhetoric of spirituality tends to spurn religion(s)' (Sutcliffe & Bowman 2000:8), it must be noted that significant changes have concurrently taken place within Christianity that reflect a shift from external sources of spiritual authority to a more holistic spirituality (Bowman 2000a:85; Heelas 1996b:149).

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Green (1986:3) describes Ascona at this time as 'the semi-official meeting place for all Europe's spiritual rebels'. A wide range of practices and beliefs were incorporated into their community, including Theosophy, vegetarianism, and the liberation of women from cultural restrictions. The eschewing of the mainstream—politically, socially and spiritually—and its back-to-nature position was reflected in the main themes that permeated this community: 'the nature cure' (ibid.:157), artistic expression, anarchy, feminism and psychotherapy. This community is seen as a precursor to the hippie movement of the 1960s and 1970s.

Hippies were primarily middle-class youths rejecting their parents' values (Desmond et al 2001:251). For these young people, the radical change in appearance, behaviour and thinking represented the most apparent reaction to, and rejection of, old community. The subsequent creation of a new community 'encompassed a disregard of national boundaries and law and order, heavy drug use and a sexual freedom that shocked the society of the day' (Hampton 2008:16). Over time, new subcultures developed out of the hippie movement, including the Ecological or Green Movement, Ferals, Wiccan and Neo-pagan. In all, the melding of nature-based spiritualities with the fusion of Eastern and Western religious traditions, gave New Agers an opportunity to 'search for spiritual and philosophical perspectives that will help transform humanity and the world' (Drury 2004:11).

A further manifestation of the New Age is the holistic health movement, 'with its emphasis of 'getting back to nature' and disenchantment with mainstream culture and its various institutions' (Baer et al 1998:1495-6), in particular, biomedicine. Earth-based practices include natural medicine, homeopathies, shamanism, and a variety of remedies and rituals drawn from indigenous groups and ancient pre-Christian traditions such as that of the Druids. Contemporary alternative and complementary practices draw from a wide range of sources. Traditional Chinese and Indian Ayurvedic medicine provide Eastern models. Western heterodoxy includes chiropractic, homeopathy and naturopathy whilst New Age therapeutic practices and techniques range from rebirthing, reiki and reflexology to channelling, iridology, guided visualisation, crystal healing and others.

The rebirthing training implicitly facilitates ideas of holistic health: the notion of health being the sum of emotional, physical, intellectual and spiritual wellbeing. Biomedical medicine is valued but a space is made for participants to explore alternatives. Whilst the notion of 'back to nature' is not specifically embedded within the training, an implicit notion of drawing on a more 'natural' course in life remains. These three philosophies—thought is creative, self as a spiritual being, and holistic health and nature—interweave and constructively reinforce and support each other, underpinning the discourse and practice of rebirthing.

### **Individualism and the New Age industry**

There is a dearth of critical analyses of rebirthing since it is a modality that has not been previously studied in depth academically. Since rebirthing emerged from the New Age, I shall endeavour to summarise the critiques of New Age therapies and situate rebirthing alongside those critiques.

The New Age has been characterised as consisting of a disparate pastiche of theories, beliefs, values, practices, and therapies from a diverse range of sources Luckmann (1996:75). The New Age movement:

collects abundant psychological, therapeutic, magic, marginally scientific, and older esoteric materials, repackages them, and offers them for individual consumption and further private syncretism [best described as a] confusing variety of practices and perspectives [that] share a concern with healing. (Hanegraaff 1996:42)

Primarily the New Age has been depicted as catering for the white middle-class (Baer et al. 1998) or, particularly, 'white female babyboomers' as Barcan suggests (2011:8). One argument posed to explain the predominance of women in the New Age is that it has provided an alternative to institutionalised patriarchal religion (Buxant, Saroglou & Tesser 2010; Zwissler 2012).

Many components, concepts, and practices of the New Age has been rendered familiar to contemporary culture thanks to talk show hosts such as Oprah Winfrey and TV pop-psychologist Dr. Phil. The mainstream incorporation of self-awareness/self-help has

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been aided by the proliferation of material, text and artefacts<sup>17</sup> available through books and magazines, specialist shops, and the internet. Practices such as yoga, mindfulness, and relaxation techniques are embedded in contemporary culture and whilst rebirthing incorporates breathing, mindfulness and relaxation into its practice, it does so in a particular way that is not always considered mainstream.

It is prudent to note that whilst New Age therapies have been subject to theoretical criticism, there has been little social or ethnographic research conducted into such therapies (Barcan 2011:42; Hedges & Beckford 2000). Barcan (2011:42-45) produces a comprehensive summary of the critiques of New Age therapies in *Complementary and Alternative Medicine*. Below I outline the three most prevalent critiques and, at the same time, reflect on rebirthing discourse in relation to these critiques.

### ***Personal responsibility***

Perhaps the most common criticism of the New Age is the notion of personal responsibility—placing the blame for the 'misfortunes' in life: illness, poverty, unemployment, solely on the shoulders of the individual (Baer et al. 1998; Barcan 2011; Coward 1989:92; Sontag 1977:61). However Hanegraaff (1996:234) argues against this, proposing that personal responsibility 'is an antidote...to the paralyzing notion that our lives are steered by forces beyond our control'. Within the framework of rebirthing, the concept of personal responsibility is utilised in the manner proposed by Hanegraaff—to aid people to move beyond their current way of thinking. In that process, care is taken to support the notion of personal responsibility as a source of enquiry and empowerment; not as a burden.

### ***Cultural Misappropriation***

Another criticism is that of the vicariously selected and misappropriation of cultural beliefs whether indigenous (Donaldson 1999:677) or Eastern (Stacey 2000:122). As Barcan (2011:44) writes, 'the West avidly consumes, appropriates and commodifies selected non-Western beliefs and practices, in the process purging them of their histories and politics'. The misappropriation of Native American customs and beliefs and,

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<sup>17</sup> Artefacts such as crystals, incense, statues, pictures

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in particular, the culturally inappropriate reproduction and commercialisation of ceremony, are well documented by Donaldson (1999:678). However, it could be argued that Eastern practices are now deeply embedded in contemporary 'Western' cultures, particularly through activities such as yoga and meditation. The connection of rebirthing with Eastern esoteric practices can be traced back to rebirthing's inception as I have outlined earlier in this chapter. From my research the conscious connected breathing cycle appears to be unique to breathwork as practiced by Orr and Groff.

### **Consumerism**

The consumption of New Age therapies is a third field of critique. Some academics argue that the un-regulated market of alternative therapies are aligned with conservative and neo-liberal values (Hanegraaff 1996:358; Sutcliffe 2006:169). Hanegraaff (1996:358), quoting Capra, extends this argument highlighting the contrast within the intended alternative culture and the reality: 'Some individuals and organizations among the "New Age" movements have shown clear signs of exploitation, fraud, sexism, and excessive economic expansion, quite similar to those observed in the corporate world'. Those that engage in New Age practice are also engaging in consuming its products; 'the pleasure-seeking, individualistic, body-focused drive of consumer culture' (Barcan 2011:36-37).

It is through the myriad of choices and the personal responsibility taken by an individual for their consumer choices that the New Age has been critically assessed as neo-liberal in its economic philosophy and action. This combination of choice and responsibility is touted within the New Age as personal empowerment. Spangler (1991:53) suggests that New Age seekers are about:

gaining the power to have whatever you need and desire; it is about getting your way, because, after all, it *is* your reality. Nothing is said, though, about reciprocity—that if you can have it all, the *all* can have you. Instead, in these workshops, you are always the consumer, never the consumed.

This 'internalised locus of authority' (Heelas 1996b:25) reinforces the requirement of the individual to maintain their sense of personal responsibility, including responsibility for their choices whether health choices or other personal choices.

Rebirthing exists within the un-regulated market and supports the mutual concepts of choice, personal responsibility and the resultant personal empowerment. Having emerged from the New Age, rebirthing maintains a relationship with the New Age principles as discussed early in this chapter: thought is creative; self as a spiritual being; and holistic health and nature. To explore and analyse the process and outcomes of the rebirthing process and training, specific attributes to being human, as identified in the next section, will be utilised.

### **Rebirthing: personhood, embodiment, and emotion**

Three central themes present as critical to rebirthing training. First, rebirthing is based on a particular understanding of personhood. The remaining two themes are embodiment and emotion; dynamics that facilitate and inform the rebirthing process. It is the interception of these three themes that influence the process of choice and change and the on-going goal of personal transformation. Whilst I briefly discuss these central themes here, they will be more fully explored in the following chapter.

Reflecting on the premise of the spiritual nature of the self within rebirthing, the self, in spiritual form, is understood to precede the body. Once born into a body, this spiritual knowledge is understood to be expunged from conscious awareness and, as a result, the newborn is rendered vulnerable to their environment. Explicit within rebirthing is the notion that any negative effects upon the person, prior to and since birth, can be revealed and reframed through the rebirthing process.

Personhood, therefore, is perceived to be flexible and changeable, and steeped in potentiality. Yet seemingly contradictory positions are attributed to this notion of personhood. On one hand, the person is understood as independent and self-determined, infinitely capable of affecting change in their lives. This I refer to as 'individualised personhood'— the person is negotiating a relationship with themselves. At the same time, the individual is explicitly connected to everything by an energy that is variously labelled life force, universal energy, or love. In this kind of 'relational personhood', the individual is unbounded or fluid in their relationship to others and the

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immediate and wider environment. The negotiation of these two aspects of personhood, individual and relational, will be analysed throughout the thesis.

Rebirthing practice requires a directed focus on embodiment, firstly by concentrating on the somatic experience and, secondly, on emotional responses that take place within their own corporeality. The somatic response is one key dynamic that directs the rebirthing process to influence change and ultimately result in personal transformation. From the rebirthing perspective, however, the body is not confined to the bounded corporeal body. An energetic body schema that will be fully explored in Chapter Four, poses an alternative body in which energetic 'body' sheaths extend outward from the physical body resulting in the blurring of body boundaries. Accordingly, as two bodies approach one another, these energy bodies are seen to overlap and intersect. This presents a dynamic that influences relationships both with others, but also the wider environment. Not only does a person have energetic influence beyond their personal energetic field, but the environment and the people with whom they come into contact also exert a reciprocal energetic influence. In this way, within rebirthing, embodiment extends beyond the boundaries of the physical body.

Whilst a person attends to their somatic experience within the rebirthing process, at the same time they are supported to explore any emotional tension and/or responses. Emotion, as a tool of rebirthing, plays a key role in the experience of rebirthing from three perspectives. First, defined as 'energy-in-motion', emotion is employed as a marker of, and doorway to, suppressed material. Once this material is revealed, a person is provided with the opportunity to make new choices, thus affecting change in their lives. Second, emotions are utilised to assess the condition of a breather before and after a rebirthing session. The expected outcome is that the breather completes a session in a more positive emotional state than prior to the session. Over time, emotional states provide a gauge of progress that leads to the third perspective. Emotions act as a signifier of a healthier self, with people having greater capacity to identify and manage their emotional responses more effectively. Through the experience of embodiment and emotion as a means of changing personhood, bodies themselves are understood to be inscribed through this transformation.

## **Methodology**

### ***Insider Ethnography and Reflexivity***

In this section I will address some of the methodological issues arising from being an insider of the rebirthing community in which I took my fieldwork. I first became interested in rebirthing in 1988, not as psychotherapy, but as a resource for, what I understood to be, my own development. I intermittently had sessions until 2004 when I undertook a second training and subsequently set up a small rebirthing practice. I also assisted at several rebirthing trainings. The impact of rebirthing on my life, and others, led me to consider how rebirthing could be critically analysed within the academic world, a challenge I took up for my post-graduate studies. At this point, I position myself very firmly as an insider to the rebirthing modality.

In the development of anthropology as a discipline, Malinowski (1978:6) suggested that the anthropologist 'ought to put himself in good conditions of work, that is, in the main, to live without other white men, right among the natives'. This approach, the total submersion into the culture being studied, has been the cornerstone of fieldwork. However, with increasingly more fieldwork being undertaken at 'home', within one's own social milieu, insider/outsider positioning has incited much discussion within anthropology (Halstead 2001; Narayan 1993; Voloder 2008). Identifying oneself as a member of a particular 'home' field site has further intensified insider/outsider debates, particularly around issues like the use of friends and family as informants and the resultant issues of intimacy and distance (Hodkinson 2005; Pink 2000; Taylor, J 2011).

A rebirthing training is a 'closed world' (Wulff 1999:147) by which I mean that no-one has entry without committing to undertaking the training. Assistants to the training are drawn from the pool of past participants. That I am a member of the rebirthing community, are considered to have long-term experience, enabled me to access this particular 'closed' field. It was my 'insider' knowledge that facilitated access, a method used by researchers when entering the home field (Bennett 2002; Taylor, J 2011). Primary to accessing my field of study was my long time professional and personal relationship with the rebirthing trainer. Without her express enthusiasm for my project, and her desire for research to be undertaken, my project would have stalled at the first point of entry.

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An outsider may have found it more challenging to access this field. Having undertaken the training several times, undergoing intense self-reflection, challenges and choices that my participants were about to undertake 'afforded me a basic familiarity with the scale, complexity, intensity on contingency' (Dyck 2000:40). This familiarity had an impact in two ways: first I ran the risk of being distracted by my own narratives, ones that I had confronted personally through my own rebirthing and training experiences. Second, my insider status presumed that I was sufficiently competent enough to handle the participants' material with confidence and professionalism. As Dyck suggests, (2000:36) 'the ethnographer's combined life experience enable or inhibit particular kinds of insights'. I would argue that my life experience and familiarity within rebirthing enabled a degree of sensitivity and insight that made the fieldwork productive.

Though I was an insider, I was positioned as a researcher in the initial stages of fieldwork by both the participants and myself. I was 'a positioned subject'. Taylor (2011:10) proposes that '[s]hared experiences cultivate degrees of intimacy between people'. As the training unfolded and the participants, including myself, began sharing intimately. This had an impact on our relationships and my role within the training. I became, primarily, a participant, albeit an informed one and my observing/researching role remained mostly in the background. Since most of my data collection was by voice recording, very quickly my recorder, which I placed centrally on the floor, became incorporated into the space. Periodically, my research role came to the foreground when a participant would suddenly make a comment about my research or I would make some notes.

For me, fieldwork intruded into my everyday life. Friends became informants, informants became my friends: ultimately, as Pink (2000:96) describes, 'my personal and professional lives were inextricably interwoven into the research'. The one-on-one interviews proved to be very valuable. Usually conducted in a coffee shop, the line between researcher and friend was constantly being negotiated. I would ask a question, the answer and a discussion would be forthcoming. Suddenly we would find ourselves talking about something unrelated to the research project, a sign that our 'friendship' overrode our 'research'. The challenges of familiarity within the 'home' setting are well-documented; balancing professional and personal boundaries (Dyck 2000); engaging

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one's close relationships as informants (Pink 2000; Taylor, J 2011); the assumed affinity by informants (Voloder 2008). Socialising outside the parameters of the rebirthing training reinforced the challenges of being an 'insider' and separating friendships from fieldwork.

My fieldwork differed from traditional fieldwork in that I had extended periods of time away from my informants. Each training weekend was particularly intense and intimate, and because my primary tool was a voice recorder, I was able to fully participate, occasionally jotting extra notes or filling in the details when returning home from the field. I was always physically, emotionally and mentally exhausted after the training weekends. It was the intermittent nature of my field that provided the space to distance myself for periods of time to transcribe and reflect on the data collected.

Bennett (2002:461) contends that possible contradictions present in the insider/researcher role are often ignored by researchers who tend to 'display an uncritical acceptance of insider knowledge as an end in itself'. Guided by my supervisors, I learnt to recognise and critically analyse 'taken-for-granted' values and attitudes within the rebirthing community—concepts of the nature of the self, personal agency, and spirituality, for example. The degree to which I had absorbed and incorporated rebirthing discourse into my own life became apparent through the writing up process. By interrogating my history with the rebirthing community, reflecting on personal choices and changes I had made through over the years, seeing the relationships and my role within the training under study, all assisted in bringing the mundane into focus.

My close friendship with the trainer and subsequent relationships with the participants also had an impact on the data I collected. Similar to Taylor (2011:11) the 'data I have gathered from friend-informants compared with informant-friends is significantly greater in volume and depth'. This became particularly evident in the one-on-one interviews where a closer rapport/friendship with the participant would result in deeper divulgements. The nature of my field and fieldwork also enabled me to conduct 'retrospective fieldwork' (Pink 2000:99), not only with the trainer, but also the other participants. A meeting or a phone call to an informant made further data collection, discussion, information sharing,

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and clarification possible. These interactions, particularly those with the trainer, gave me greater insight into:

body language and non-verbal communication; sensitive or covert topics; detecting false-truths; emotive behaviour; the degrees of affect that something may have upon someone (for example, shame or disappointment about which people may be less likely to speak openly); logics of taste and rationality; an informant's self image and their performative attempts at displaying this; and their intended meaning which may sometimes be obscured by incongruous or abstruse language, but is also able to be referentially decoded through the researcher's intimate understanding of past events and/or their knowledge of the informant's personal history. (Taylor, J 2011:11)

I contend it is not possible to undergo research of this magnitude, within the field of rebirthing, without a significant impact on my own personhood. Negotiating the intensely intimate and private milieu of the rebirthing training with a group of people prepared to interrogate themselves and their lives, has been challenging and transformative for me. My personal experience of fieldwork resonates with Taylor's (2011:12) proposal that '[o]bserving the personal and intense negotiations of one's morality and self-image ... has, to date, been one of the greatest privileges and luxuries of being an intimate insider researcher'.

### ***Fieldwork***

The primary fieldwork for this thesis was conducted across a nine-month rebirthing training run between January and September 2009. Participants for my fieldwork comprised the six new trainees and the trainer. The three assistants were additional informants. Once consent was given, I conducted an initial interview with each participant before the commencement of the training. My initial interviews had a two-fold purpose. First, I collected personal details from the participants including how people came to rebirthing, why they chose to undertake a rebirthing training and other experiences of complementary or alternative therapies, and their relationship with the biomedical system. Second, as a familiarisation tool that operated for both parties. One participant, who had been highly anxious about a researcher being present during the training, reported to me: 'As soon as I met you I knew it would be alright.' I attribute this response primarily to my experience and knowledge of the field into which this particular participant was about to step. This was a distinct advantage in undertaking fieldwork in

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this environment—my participants knew I was familiar with rebirthing, the space and its dynamics.

As a participant observer, the training program itself provided the primary opportunity to observe and record the setting, events, behaviours, relationships, spatial and temporal arrangements, and other aspects of ethnographic interest. Both field notes and extensive audio recordings were made during the training sessions. In addition, informal unstructured discussions occurred, primarily in those spaces occupied during breaks from the training throughout the day. At various stages, I conducted individual interviews outside of the training forum. These interviews were tailored for each person to ascertain their impressions and experiences of the rebirthing training. Individual participant information was collected through these personal interviews, recording detailed narratives of experiences of the rebirthing process. These interactions took place at a variety of places, sometimes at participants' homes, often in coffee shops. At the completion of the rebirthing training, I undertook final individual formal semi-structured interviews with each informant.

I collected a range of resources, namely the Certificate IV in Rebirthing/Breathwork Therapy training manuals, and the loose-leaved articles handed out to the participants each weekend. These articles covered a wide range of topics and included health related articles, poems, quizzes and jokes. I also accessed the manuals for the Diploma of Applied Health (Rebirthing/Breathwork Therapy) that outline much of the theory behind this particular rebirthing training. By attending national and local rebirthing/breathwork conferences, I had the opportunity to experience and discuss other modes of breathwork therapy, and throughout that time, maintain informal relationships with other practitioners and participants. I also accessed other trainers and members of the public who had undertaken rebirthing as further informants. These people, though not explicit within this thesis, all helped me to formulate concepts and ideas that informed my research. Throughout these nine months, I charted a life course for the six participants, analysing a transformation that took place at a personal level and within a wider sphere. In their search for change, these participants chose rebirthing training through which to facilitate this transformation.

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My field site of choice presented deeply emotional and personal material. Without the years of experience behind me, as a researcher I believe the range and depth of data collected would have seriously been comprised. As a participating observer, my somatic and emotional responses also constantly presented themselves; responses that required reflexive management. In this way I was 'exploring representations of the self that reflected aspects of my own experience' (Pink 2000:96), not only in the past, but also during my fieldwork. Longhurst, Ho & Johnston (2008:208) propose that 'the body is a primary tool through which all interactions and emotions filter in accessing research subjects and their geographies'. My history with rebirthing, including my body history, has provided me with both an explicit and an unqualifiable implicit knowledge of the theory and practice of rebirthing. I remain unapologetic of the subjective nature of this understanding, as it reflects the very subjective nature of the ethnographic product; that is, the outcomes for the participants of rebirthing. I believe my history with rebirthing enabled me to produce a narrative that may have been more challenging for a researcher without this experiential knowledge.

The first few weekends were uncomfortable for me. Was I intruding? What was the least intrusive means of taking field notes? Were the participants intimidated by the small voice recorder I placed in the middle of the floor? I reflect on Dennis' (2007:45) insight: 'I began to get the feeling that these people were not my informants; I was, rather, *their* anthropologist. I now feel the full weight of the responsibility, and the power, of writing their lives, as their anthropologist'. That point occurred for me listening to banter amongst the participants during a morning tea break when they discussed, or rather argued, about who was going to be the star in my final thesis. I had clearly been positioned as 'their researcher'. That I was able to do justice to this very private and personal time in their lives has been a constant source of anxiety. I can only hope this thesis fulfils my participants' expectations.

Whilst my research may be enriched by my history with rebirthing, this familiarity posed possibly one of its greatest disadvantages. For me, it has been a constant challenge to interrogate much of this material critically. As rebirthing has been such a large part of my life, I have been required to interrogate that which I take for granted. To take a step back has been a real challenge and has required rigorous reflexivity for critical analysis.

## **Outline of Chapters: Thesis Plan**

The thesis is organised around exploring the current themes raised in this chapter. Chapter Two explores the assumptions and presuppositions that are embedded in the rebirthing training through an examination of anthropological literature on personhood, embodiment and emotion. Particular notions of personhood are explicit and implicit within rebirthing, and embodiment and emotion are key dynamics used through rebirthing to facilitate change through the process. In Chapter Three I introduce my participants, exploring the reasons why people choose to commit to this nine-month rebirthing training. The training commences with an introductory weekend in which the emotion of fear dominates so the constitution of safety within the training—spatially, temporally and spiritually—is explored. As the participants temporarily set aside old relationships, they start the journey of challenging their belief systems, explore their relationship with themselves, and experiment with relationships with people within the training, ultimately taking new realisations and experiences out to their private lives.

Chapter Four addresses the second weekend of the training, which explores conception and birth. In this chapter, the participants' experiences and understandings of these critical paths to life are analysed, drawing on a specific model of the body—the body as energy. Parental Disapproval Syndrome and Education (training weekends three and four) explore the effects of childhood and the subsequent relationships formed with significant people and are the subjects of Chapter Five. Issues of agency, choice and free will become evident, as will the transformative nature of the training; transformation being an ongoing process and objective throughout the training. Chapter Six explores the fifth weekend of the training, the Fear weekend. The emotion of fear, one that is understood within rebirthing to inhibit agency, is embodied and confronted, and the concept of personal responsibility is explored.

The remainder of the training moves into the adult realm. Chapter Seven explores weekend six on Money, and the seventh weekend on Sexuality and Relationships. It is through one's relationship with money and significant others that past choices are manifested and the participants, yet again, are confronted with new choices for ongoing transformation. Chapter Eight explores the eighth and ninth weekends: God, Death and

## 1 *'It's like finding a whole new person in there'*

Immortality, and Completion, respectively. Through this chapter, the participants are encouraged to explore their spiritual identity. Love surfaces as a key theme that carries into the last weekend of the training; the closure of this transformative process preceding their movement back into their own lives. Through a deeply moving ceremony on the last day, the participants leave the training. In the concluding chapter, Chapter Nine, transformation of the participants, made in light of their original intentions. is explored through final interviews I conducted after the training was completed.

Rebirthing as a modality is relatively unknown and the label itself conjures up a range of responses, from the derisive and dismissive to wary interest. Therefore, this initial chapter has informed the background of the thesis by outlined the history of rebirthing, and its central principles of 'thought is creative', 'self as a spiritual being', and 'holistic health and nature'. Central to the thesis are themes of personhood, emotion and embodiment, critical to the examination and analysis of the experiences of the participants of this nine-month rebirthing training. Knowingly undertaking fieldwork in a field that I know to be intensely personal and intimate in nature causes me to closely reflect on my role as a participant/observer. Having undertaken this training myself, I am aware of the fear, pain, resistance, love, joy and relief as some of the wide range of responses people have at various stages of the training. Everyone has a story, one that has been created from their life's journey and their choices. I submit that participants in my research are searching for a meaningful and practical modality with the view to transform their lives. As Giddens (1991:54, italics in original) proposes:

A person's identity is not to be found in behaviour, nor...in the reactions of others, but in the capacity *to keep a particular narrative going*. The individual's biography, if she is to maintain regular interaction with others in the day-to-day world, cannot be wholly fictive. It must continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the ongoing 'story' about the self.

As my thesis unfolds, the principles upon which this particular training is based will become apparent as I engage in an empirically based social analysis of '*looking at* [rather] than *seeing through*' (Barcan 2011:45, italics in original) the practice of rebirthing. The transformation process, as possible through rebirthing, is predicated on a particular view of personhood, experience of embodiment and expression of emotion. In

*1 'It's like finding a whole new person in there'*

Chapter Two, I undertake a deeper examination of these three themes, both academically and within rebirthing discourse.

## 2

### Personhood, Emotion and Embodiment

*I used to be very quiet, very shy. I'd be the first one, with a book, in another room reading instead of interacting with people. I've been so afraid of stepping into my own power. I haven't felt solid enough in myself, to embrace who I really need to be. Rebirthing makes me feel huge. I feel tingly; that's the main sensation that I get as I'm lying there and doing the breathing. My limbs and my body just feel like they're almost going to explode with this energy. I usually then start to have the vision of what I need to do—I've always been a very visual person. It will occasionally set off twitching and movement, usually in my legs through some of these sessions. I think that as I open myself up more, and feel more comfortable with that, I'm actually feeling more of the sensations in my body.*

*After all the challenges and changes over the last nine months I feel like I have been 'reborn' literally. I'm thinking that the journey now really starts with me. I really feel that I have the inner strength and the tools to claim my life back; it makes me feel just so good. The challenges are there and I know I still have a way to go with the fear and the apprehension, but it's mine. And I just want to embrace it and run with it now. I've empowered myself and the course has helped to really empower me. I know I'm heading in the right direction and it just feels so right to me.*

This quote is taken from the final interview conducted with one of the trainees and emphasises that the rebirthing training program provides an opportunity for transformation of the person and their lives. The major themes of this thesis—personhood, embodiment, emotion, relationships, responsibility, honesty, trust, and spirituality—are encapsulated in this participant's experience of the training.

The primary goal of rebirthing is transformation through utilising an altered breathing pattern that initially takes place within the self. The subsequent deepening level of self-awareness potentially leads to change through making certain choices. People who have elected to undertake a rebirthing training are explicitly aiming to challenge their own understandings of themselves. Due to the energetic interconnection between all beings, this change is seen to have an effect on a person's relationships and environment, 'like the ripples from a stone being thrown into a pond', explains Margaret. In *Personal Development: the Spiritualisation and Secularisation of the Human Potential Movement*, Puttick (2000:205) proposes that 'insight, self-love and love for others are inextricably linked and mutually enhancing'. Rebirthing discourse reflects this concept which converges with the adage 'for things to change, first I must change'. The resultant

'change with regard to self-understanding and experience' (Heelas 1996b:186) remains the focus within this framework. Within contemporary Australian society, with its attention on the individual as 'empowered' to create their ideal self, self-help and self-awareness has emerged as a major industry; one that is constructed around a reflexive self capable of choice and change. The ultimate objective is the revelation of the "true self as naturally social, compassionate and attuned to the rhythms of the natural world' (Hedges & Beckford 2000:172).

Central to rebirthing and the rebirthing training is a particular construction of personhood; one that is informed partially by a 'Western' construction of personhood as an autonomous, self-determined individual, but which also draws on very specific ways of experiencing the body. This self, being spiritual and energetic in nature, is a fluid self that is best described as 'porous'—that is, open to influences from the world and the past, including past lives. Exploring and examining the experiences of people through rebirthing is contingent on an implicit notion of personhood: that a person is capable of making changes in their understandings and perceptions of self and enable personal transformation. Notions of personhood and the self are central to rebirthing training. Change, as sought by participants, is achieved through the dynamics of emotion and embodiment that, in turn, bring about changes in beliefs, values and behaviours. It is through these changes that transformation is brought about in their lives. Throughout the thesis, personhood remains a central theme, one which is continually shaped and re-shaped through the emotional and embodied experiences of the rebirthing training. Embodiment and emotion are central to understanding the model of personhood that operates in rebirthing.

Within rebirthing, the person or individual is understood to be the primary agent for transformation. The ultimate goal of rebirthing is to reveal the true nature of the self, which is conceptualised as divine and immortal. Rebirthing discourse proposes that every person has the knowledge and power within themselves for self-transformation and, subsequently, for transforming their lives. A secondary outcome is the wider effect. As they institute change within themselves and their lives, their energetic shift impacts on their environment and those around them. Sometimes an objective stance is undertaken within the rebirthing process, but the somatic and emotional experience

remains subjective and contingent on the individual. The individual maintains their subjective self despite the energetic essence that connects each individual to 'everything else'. Within that energetic milieu, the individual remains capable of self-determination. The self as effective agent is spiritual, fluid, flexible, and open to transformation in both the inner and outer worlds. The rebirthing process draws on the somatic and emotional experiences of the participant, which begins and informs this process of awareness and change. As such, the dynamics of emotion and embodiment are key factors to the unveiling of the inner world within rebirthing. As rebirthing is subjective, each individual has their own experiences of emotion and embodiment; neither are preferenced over the other, each are viewed equally valid, and are considered mutually supportive.

This chapter is divided into three sections: personhood, embodiment, and emotion. In each section I shall explore and elaborate on the particular assumptions about each key factor that underpins rebirthing. These assumptions are embedded in a particular presupposition about the nature of the universe, specifically the body, within a rebirthing framework. Where possible, I have theoretically substantiated this examination, however there is much within rebirthing that is implicit and embedded in practice.

### **Personhood: being a person**

The notion of personhood is central to the study of humans and relationships. LiPuma (1998:56) acknowledges this, stating 'there is no way to grasp...the anthropological project itself without clarifying the character of personhood'. What is a person? How do people conceive of themselves? Anthropology explores how people are constituted within their particular social context, and how they experience and understand themselves as persons premised on the notion that understandings of personhood vary across different cultures. As Ingold (1991:357-358) proposes, '[p]ersons, in conventional social anthropological parlance, are constituted within culture...adopting a particular, culturally defined life-course'. This cultural variation becomes evident beginning with the attribution of personhood; ranging from the 'North American debate...whether the person begins at conception, at birth, or in one of the culturally established "trimesters" between the two' (Csordas 2002:93), or other cultural customs that attribute personhood

## 2 'Personhood, Emotion and Embodiment

according to their beliefs. Whilst the differing understandings and experiences of personhood are of interest, personhood within any culture is not static and is susceptible to alteration. As (Hemer 2013:245) proposes, '[p]ersonhood is affected by internal and external influences, and changes over time'.

Definitions of personhood, individual, and self vary (Cohen 1994:2; Spiro 1993:113). Harris (1989:601) clearly differentiates between the three by defining 'the individual...as a single member of human kind'; 'the self...as a locus of experience'; and a 'person...as an agent'. Spiro (1993:117) invites us to 'distinguish between "person"...referring holistically to the psycho-socio-biological individual [and] "self"...the individual's own person,' whereas Cohen (1994:57) preferences the self over personhood in that 'the self assimilates personhood, is affected, but not subordinated by it'. Ingold (1991:367, italics in original) conflates person and self, proposing that the:

person *is* the self, not however in the Western sense of the private, closed-in subject confronting the external, public world of society and its relationships, but in the sense of its positioning as a focus of agency and experience *within* a social relational field.

Ingold's position is supported by Smith (2012:3), who argues that the 'person' and 'self are interchangeable'.

In the past, anthropologists have tended to focus on 'other' exotic types of personhood sometimes distinguishing clearly between 'Western' personhood and 'other'. Whilst comparing Western and Indian notions of personhood in the 1950s, Dumont (1980:232) posits Indian society as an example of 'man as a collective being [in contrast to] man as an individual' in 'the modern Western type of society'. Societies around the world, according to Dumont, could be defined either as holistic or individualistic. This dichotomy has persisted in anthropological theories on personhood in the 'West', most famously defined by Geertz (1974:31) as:

a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe; a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background.

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A range of variations of this dichotomy have emerged. Hofstede (1980) explores the individualism/collectivism paradigm, and Shweder & Bourne propose (1984:190) 'sociocentric' and 'egocentric' conceptions of the 'West' and 'other'. Strathern (1988:13), comparing the dividual of Melanesia to the individual of the 'West', defines the dividual as 'persons [who] are frequently constructed as the plural and composite site of the relationships that produced them' and thus, 'contain a generalized sociality within'. As such, Strathern (*ibid.*:13) claims that Melanesian persons are '[f]ar from being regarded as unique entities'. The implication of Strathern's interpretation of her fieldwork in Melanesia is that it is through relationships that personhood is formed.

This dichotomy reproduces contrasting personhood:

between the details of some rather exotic cultural "other" (Javanese, Samoan, Navaho, and so forth) and a more prosaic and rather too amorphous categorical referent for "ourselves" (variously, "Western," "Euro-American," or "Industrial").' (Stephenson 1989:227)

The 'East/West' dichotomies of Dumont, Geertz, Strathern and others, however, do not account for variations within a culture. LiPuma (1998:56) argues that within 'all cultures...there exists both individual and dividual modalities of aspects of personhood'; a view that is supported by Ewing (1990:251) who posits that 'in all cultures people can be observed to project multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are context-dependent and may shift rapidly'. Thus assuming all 'Eastern' personhoods to be labelled holistic, collectivist, sociocentric, dividual, or relational is to fail to appreciate the nuances of personhood. As Ewing (1990:257) states, 'a single model of self or person is not adequate for describing how selves are experienced or represented in any culture'. The same can be applied to 'Western' personhood. As Kusserow (1999:546) argues, 'flattening the Western self into a simple, homogenous, neat package...ignores the heterogeneity and complexity of this self', a self that has been 'widely described as individuated, detached, separate and self-sufficient' (Morris 1994:16-17).

Modernity, which Giddens (1991:15) posits as the 'industrialised world', evolved from the breakdown of traditional communities and subsequent emergence of social, political and financial institutions marked by 'state, nation, class, factory, family' (Weiss 2003:269). Giddens (1991:3) further proposes that in "high or 'late' modernity – our present day

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world – the self, like the broader institutional contexts in which it exists, has to be reflexively made'. Adam (1996:144) suggests that this 'post-modern' era is identifiable by 'terms such as 'the contemporary', 'the now' and 'the present' [that] are mobile, relative and flexible'. Drawing on this reflexive personhood of Giddens in a post-modern era, I assert that the notion of the 'individual' has enabled people to create their own sense of self and identity. Through a reflexive process, the individual is in a position to challenge their old self and create a new sense of self irrespective and independent of their social field. Beck & Beck-Gernsheim (1996:25) propose that this contemporary notion of individualisation is present not only in the form of 'disintegration of previously existing social forms', but also through the institutions of modern societies where people seeking 'social advantages [are required] to do something, to make an active effort'. In other words, people are not solely a product of their environments. Individuals are also seen to have, and indeed are expected to exercise, the capacity to challenge those environments through self-reflection and actively engaging in change. In fact, in contemporary society there is an implicit expectation that people take increasing responsibility for 'creating' their 'selves'. Sökefeld (1999:430) proposes that a:

conceptualization of the self has to be developed from heightened attention to the human capacity and necessity for action. An inevitable premise is that all humans are able and required to act, which means that there is no culture (or identity) acting for them or uncontradictably prescribing which mode of behaviour must be chosen in any situation.

To do so, increasing agency, self-awareness and consciousness is required to interpret, understand, and negotiate the individual's new subjective embodied experience. Barcan (2011:34, italics in original) proposes that this "subjective'...modernity is characterized by a movement away from a role- and duty-based understanding of selfhood towards one in which aspects of *inner* experience become primary', keeping in mind that this '*inner* experience' is constantly informed by the relationships external to the self.

Personhood, therefore, can be analysed as an active agent within a culture negotiating relationships rather than being constructed by relationships—the impact of society upon its members backgrounded. 'Societies do *not* determine the selves of their members. They may construct models of personhood; they may...*attempt* to reconcile selfhood to personhood. But they have absolutely no powers in this regard' (Cohen 1994:71). The

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breakdown of traditional cultures, whether 'West' or 'East,' created a space for 'people...to stand back from, critically reflect upon, and lose their faith in what the traditional has to offer. [Now] they can have *their own say*' (Heelas 1996a:4). Social relations, however, maintain currency and affect personhood. As Morris (1994:16-17) affirms, 'the person (self) is both embodied and embedded within a nexus of social relations'. There remains a dance, a play between the structures of society and the person with their potential to explore and negotiate their own experience. This personhood, in contemporary times, is constructed as a 'unique, conscious, responsible, atomized, discrete, bounded, coherent, choosing, acting individual equipped with a personal consciousness and a personal conscience' (Rose 1996:302).

Rebirthing challenges the 'Anglo-Saxon notion of the "individual" as a bounded, unique, integrated, motivational, and cognitive universe' (Scheper-Hughes 1993:414). Embedded in rebirthing practice and discourse are particular assumptions about the self and personhood; assumptions that, at times, align themselves with wider social norms, and at other times, lie outside 'normal' parameters. Rebirthing does not clearly differentiate between notions of the self, the individual, the person; they tend to be conflated and thus interchangeable. Rebirthing discourse and practice support each person to explore and develop their own sense of personhood. Rebirthing personhood is always unique, bounded or unbounded, not so much integrated as striving towards integration, and certainly motivated. Whilst the individual acts as a 'dynamic epicentre of awareness, emotion, judgement, and action' (ibid.:414), within rebirthing the relational aspects of personhood, the interconnection with others, plays an equally important role to the discrete individual.

Specific presuppositions regarding the nature of the person are maintained within rebirthing. Foregrounding the self as a divine manifestation (Bruce 2000:227), personhood is prefaced as a spiritual being undertaking a human existence. 'To experience the 'Self' itself is to experience 'God', the 'Goddess', the 'Source', 'Christ Consciousness', the 'inner child', the 'way of the heart'...'inner spirituality'...the 'Higher Self' (Heelas 1996b:19). For rebirthing proponents, it is believed that the spiritual being has multiple lives, and as such, this spiritual being chooses to be reincarnated into a physical life as an opportunity to learn lessons to achieve spiritual awareness. The

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ultimate goal is 'enlightenment', 'at-one-ness', 'authenticity'. This perception of the self as a spiritual being, according to Puttick (2000:215), breaks down the 'ancient duality between world and spirit.' Furthermore the human being as a spiritual being infers, within rebirthing, that the individual is far greater and more powerful than initially perceived. As a spiritual being, the current physical world in which they reside is no longer the limitation and other realms are potentially available and are considered accessible through rebirthing, including past lives.

'Family life provides the young child with the parameters of self consciousness' (Cohen 1994:55) and it is the 'consciousness of self' that Cohen proposes to be the 'defining characteristic of selfhood' (Cohen 1994:168). It is through the relationships with family members and their environment that a child formulates a sense of who they are. However, this self conscious awareness is not static. Rebirthing discourse subscribes to the theory that throughout childhood, through experiences from both within and without the boundaries of the family, a child is continually building and revising this sense of self, continually re-creating their self-identity. As Giddens argues, '[s]elf-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography' (1991:53). Colombetti & Thompson propose that 'living beings are autonomous agents that actively generate and maintain their identities' (2008:55). Yet Rose (1996:302) suggests that modernity destabilises and transforms identity such that '[i]dentity is no longer experienced as a natural, coherent and unchanging attribute of the individual, but as the uncertain and fractured result of personal decisions and plans'. Rebirthing posits the self as an ongoing malleable subject that can retrieve and reframe memory to recreate personhood into a preferred state for the individual. As such, memory within rebirthing is multiple in its nature and highly flexible. To analyse personhood within the rebirthing context necessitates a particular conceptualisation of the body.

## Embodiment: the body self

Giddens (1991:56) proposes that '[t]he self, of course, is embodied'. The body is an essential part of personhood by providing the mechanism—the tool for practicing personhood through embodiment. As Lyon and Barbalet (1994:50-51) suggest:

What we feel and clothe are our bodies; we seek comfort and pleasure in our own and other's bodies; we are concerned with the health of our bodies; and, in general we use our bodies as instruments of our desires...it is with our bodies that we express our feelings and dispositions and actively occupy the spaces we inhabit.

Some exceptions to this rule include the bodiless person—the vivid recollections of a deceased loved one—or the person-less body—the brain dead person maintained on life support. To exercise personhood however, as explored in the previous section, a body is required as 'person...*is both organism and self*' (Ingold, T. 1991:367, italics in original).

Giddens (1991:56) further suggests that the body learns to act in routine ways to enable the negotiation of daily activities. As Goffman (1971:248) writes:

almost every activity that any individual easily performs now was at some time for him something that required anxious mobilization of effort. To walk to cross a road, to utter a complete sentence, to wear long pants, to tie one's own shoes, to add a column of figures—all these routines that allow the individual unthinking, competent performance were attained through an acquisition process whose early stages were negotiated in a cold sweat.

However, this normalisation of body action in everyday life can be disrupted by unexpected events when the person may be called upon to engage their body in a thinking mode. As such, 'the individual's immediate world can be one of two places for him: where easy control is maintained or where he is fully involved in self-preserving action' (ibid.:248). In such circumstances, the person is required to negotiate their environment with greater bodily consciousness.

The body can also act as a site of power through bodily control (Giddens 1991:56). This discipline is not the discipline of Foucault's (1977:136) 'docile body' that assumes that the person is vulnerable to sources of external power, and has been trained to react and perform in particular ways that limit agency of the actor. Rather than these bodies being

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'subjected to forces in which they have no formative role' (Dennis 2007:40), disciplined bodies can be understood as being 'intrinsic to the competent social agent...routine control of the body is integral to the very nature both of agency and of being accepted (trusted) by others as competent' (Giddens 1991:57).

Csordas (1999b:146) reminds us that in the 1970—80s, the 'notion of "experience" virtually dropped out of theorising about culture'. Since then, an interest in the body has emerged: embodiment as utilised to negotiate life, exploring in depth the complex and various ways in which the embodied person perceives, engages and interacts within their public and private domains. Csordas (1990:5, italics in original) proposes that 'embodiment begins from the methodological postulate that the body is not an *object* to be studied in relation to culture, but is considered as the *subject* of cultures, or in other words as the existential ground of culture'. This bodily experience entails a breakdown of the Cartesian separation of mind and body, and provides an understanding of the body, not as separate from the mind, but 'as the grounds of all perception...including within its bounds such a thing as "the mind"' (Dennis 2007:33). This unified mind/body is reflected in our experiences of our bodies; that for the most part we are not objectively aware of it—we experience our worlds through our subjective perceptions (Csordas 1990:36). This lack of objective awareness is explored by Leder (1990:1) who suggests that '[w]hile in one sense the body is the most abiding and inescapable presence in our lives, it is also essentially characterized by absence'—'the absent body'. Although humans operate through a body, much of the time the person is not consciously aware of that body. It is, however, through exploring and relating the experiences with, and of, the body that I undertake the analysis of personhood within rebirthing.

Over time, the study of embodiment has expanded to include sensual aspects (Paterson 2007; Stoller 1997; Van Der Geest 1998); the experience and management of emotion (Dennis 2007; Hemer 2010; Scheper-Hughes 1993); intellectual awareness (Lock & Scheper Hughes 1996; Smith, BR 2007); and spiritual aspects of embodiment (Boddy 1994; Sansom 1998). However, these categories are not discrete and overlap considerably, incorporating experiences of personhood.

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To illustrate contrasting experiences of personhood and embodiment, I first draw on Scheper-Hughes (1993) research into the high infant mortality rate within the Alto do Cruzeiro, Brazil. Living in abject poverty has resulted in a maternal attitude toward their newborns that stands in contrast to the 'assumptions and values implicit in the structure of the "modern," Western, bourgeois family' (ibid.:401). Scheper-Hughes describes at length the necessity to nourish and support family members who have demonstrated their survivability. As such, a newborn/infant 'must...prove themselves worthy of trust and attachment' (ibid.:411). Until such time, personhood is withheld in a 'social environment that minimizes the "individual" nature of the infant' (ibid.:415). The Alto child has to prove itself worthy of support through its ability to survive this period in which they are denied personhood, during which the mother/child relationship is inhibited. It is through the embodied experiences of the 'neglected' infant and the 'dry-eyed stoicism and nonchalant air of Alto mothers' (ibid.:430) that Scheper-Hughes is able to analyse this cultural phenomenon.

A contrasting view of embodiment and personhood is explored in *Police Beat* in which Dennis (2007) describes and analyses the embodied experiences of members of a police band, both individually and dividually. As individuals, band members, at times, 'incorporate and embody elements of musical instruments and musical sounds' during performances. However, during rehearsal they 'regard instruments and instrument sounds as objects which are positioned wholly external to their own bounded bodies' (ibid.:28). The extent of embodiment of their instruments and sounds varies according to the circumstances. The embodied experience of band members when playing as a band is vividly recounted in descriptions of when 'in performance contexts, band members extend themselves, their hearing, taste, olfactory and touch senses, out into instrument sounds, tastes and smells and into the instrument bodies that they touch' (ibid.:131). This becomes dividualised as band members, in performance, merge as a single band unit. They 'play not as individual contributors to an entire musical piece...but instead as one single band' (ibid.:142).

Although rebirthing is highly individualised, it also concurrently draws on the experiences of the person as a member of a wider community. In this way, rebirthing reflects both the 'Western' individualised sense of personhood and the relational/dividual aspects of

personhood that also play a crucial role in the process. Within rebirthing the body plays a central role in the transformational process of personhood; embodiment is absolutely essential.

The body in rebirthing is predicated on the concept of a universal energy that is spiritual in nature. All matter, seen and unseen, within the universe is constructed of energy. Therefore the body is also constructed of energy (a concept that will be more fully explored in Chapter Four), and is understood to be a solidified energy mass reinforcing the spiritual nature of the human being. Barcan (2011:26, italics in original) describes this as 'an animated universe—one comprised of an energy that is simultaneously living, material and divine and that unites not only philosophically but *literally* and *materially* all humans'. For rebirthing, 'the *entire body* is imagined as inherently expressive, receiving, storing, and transmitting information' (Barcan 2009:212, italics in original). Bruce (2000:227) suggests that from this holistic perspective 'everything – ourselves, the material world, the supernatural world – is really just one single essence.' Within this model, all is connected with the potential to impact energetically in any and every direction. Whilst the self retains its individuality, it also is part of a greater whole, unique yet unbounded. Ingold (2003:373, italics in original) describes this junction between interconnectedness and autonomy as such:

relationships *unfold* in the course of purposive social action, they are *enfolded* in the consciousness of persons, that is, the structures of the self. The connection between social relations and consciousness should thus be understood in terms of unfolding and enfolding, rather than in terms of cause and effect.

Whilst the energetic body is energetically available and interconnected, within rebirthing, the self remains a self-determined aspect. '[T]here is no higher authority than the individual self' (Bruce 2000:227); thus the individual is seen as possessing the ability to be authentic, autonomous and self-determined, a personhood that is prevalent and privileged through the self-development/self-transformation lexicon (Hedges & Beckford 2000:172; Heelas 1996b:21). Within rebirthing discourse and practice, this self is capable of choice, of change, and of transformation such that 'agency, reflexivity, and the self go hand in hand, each requiring both the others' (Sökefeld 1999:430).

The body is understood to be central in particular ways within the practice of rebirthing. Rather than the absent body of Leder (1990:3) 'typified by a certain "disembodied" style of life,' the body is very present within the rebirthing field, both as a source of information and a means of agency. As a source of information, embodiment is a major aspect of the rebirthing process itself. Throughout the therapeutic breathing session, the rebirthee is guided to focus attention on managing and experiencing their bodies. From a management perspective, they are supported to maintain their focus on bodily aspects, maximising total relaxation of the body after which attention is then drawn to the conscious connected breathing cycle. Once these two aspects have been managed, the rebirthee is then guided to notice sensorial experiences within the body (the rebirthing process is more fully explored in Chapter Three).

Within rebirthing physical sensations are ascribed agency as indicators as to 'how the person is travelling'. As Ahmed (2004a:30) proposes, it is 'through the recognition or interpretation of sensations, which are responses to the impressions of objects and other, and the transformation of such sensations into emotions and judgements, that bodily surfaces take shape'. Experiences of pain, temperature, pressure, tension and any other form of bodily sensation are considered as a source of information for the individual. Beyond these somatics, sensory perception also informs. In the course of a rebirth, rebirthees have reported visual, auditory, olfactory sensorial impressions, each of these contributing to the subjective experience of rebirthing. By drawing on the embodied responses of the rebirthee, rebirthing provides a means to mediate initially their psyche—between the conscious thought and subconscious/unconscious<sup>18</sup>, 'thought processes that happen outside consciousness'<sup>19</sup> (Douglas 2007). The process of bringing the subconscious into conscious awareness then enables further mediation between the psychic and the social. Within rebirthing, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual components individually and collectively inform the experience of the person. Mutually constructive, the embodied and emotional experiences intersect and overlap, and this nexus, in conjunction with cognitive perception and insight, is seen as an integrated system, acting as a synergetic whole. As Longhurst et al state (2008:210), 'bodies are lived and experienced through emotions'. Emotion, operating through the

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<sup>18</sup> Contemporary theory suggests that unconscious and subconscious are interchangeable.

<sup>19</sup> These concepts are heavily informed by Western psychology and contemporary neuroscience.

body, is understood as critical in accessing greater awareness through the rebirthing process.

### **Emotion: embodied sociality**

In *The Feeling Body: Toward an Enactive Approach to Emotion*, Colombetti and Thompson (2008:48) explore theoretical perspectives starting with the notion of emotion as psychosomatic—the body manifesting emotion. Colombetti and Thompson then argue that the body was 'lost' in the social emotion theory of the 1960-70s when 'bodily processes in emotion [were reduced] to by-products of evaluations' (ibid.:50). A reunion of mind and body has since taken place, positing 'emotions [as] embodied appraisals—that is, bodily states that track meaning in the environment' (ibid.:52).

A biological focus has resulted in a tendency to concentrate on the bodily aspect of emotion. As Damasio (2001:102) suggests, 'emotion, and the experience of emotion, are the highest-order direct expressions of bioregulation in complex organisms', the reduction of emotions to neural feedback mechanisms being valuable for exploring emotion in relation to survival mechanisms, its role in memory, reasoning, and decision-making. The main issue with 'identifying a set of fundamental human emotions, universal, discrete, and presumably innate', according to Wierzbicka (1986:584) is one of semantics. English, the most common language for academic discourse, does not necessarily have equivalent terms in another cultural setting. Ekman (1993:384), through exploring the universal nature of emotional expression, suggests that emotional expressions for fear, anger, disgust, sadness and enjoyment are natural and universal. Universal basic emotions and universal expression of emotion have been heavily contested by other theorists. As Rosaldo (1984) proposes that, rather than assuming that emotions are universally the same across cultures, there are significant ways in which people differ. 'Not only does "shame" appear to differ, given differences in socio-political milieu, but...much the same thing can be said of the emotions called by names like "envy," "happiness," "love," and "rage"' (ibid.:149). A biological focus is not useful in understanding the complex cultural, social and embodied nature of emotion and Abu-

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Lughod (1990:25) argues for a cultural construction of emotion where 'emotions are embedded in cultural contexts that give them meaning'.

Emotions may be defined as judgements. As a complex interaction and response to both internal and external forces, embodied and evaluated, '[e]motional judgements are marked by their importance to us, by fact that our self-esteem is at stake in them' (Solomon 1977:47). In this way emotions remain subjective: 'one's own viewpoint [of] what one experiences...when he or she has an emotion' (ibid.1977:44). Our emotional reactions to a certain situation are mediated by our subjective response—a premise that operates within rebirthing discourse. What may cause us to react with anger in one situation may not elicit the same response if that situation involves someone close to us. As Prinz (2004:69) proposes, '[e]motions are gut reactions: they use our bodies to tell us how we are faring in the world'.

Ahmed (2004b:9) argues that 'emotions should not be regarded as psychological states, but as social and cultural practices,' and as such, are experienced and managed accordingly. Lutz (1986:287) posits 'the concept of emotion as a master Western cultural category', then hypothesises a cultural construction of emotion within the developed world as a:

widely shared American ethnotheory of basically Protestant European, middle class background, which is evident in social science theorizing, everyday discourse, and clinical psychological practice. (ibid.:289)

Australian notions of emotion remain strongly rooted in an Anglo-centric frame drawn from Weber's Calvinist notions of rational conduct and emotional control. Although multicultural society within Australia has contributed to a far greater range of emotional expression, Lutz (1986:288) argues that emotion, in the 'West', is primarily identified with 'irrationality, subjectivity, the chaotic and other negative characteristics'. Yet at the same time, emotion maintains a positive value from the aspect of relationality; 'community and connection against alienation' (ibid.:290). If one is not able to relate to another in a meaningful way through emotional connection, estrangement can ensue.

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Emotions enable us to communicate, interact and engage in our social worlds. Lyon and Barbalet (1994:48) propose that emotions produce a 'body [that] is intercommunicative and active; [that] emotion is precisely the experience of embodied sociality'. This emotional embodiment enables the person to engage, interact, experience and enact agency within their social worlds: 'to integrate feeling in both experience of the world and action in it; to understand the body not merely as socio-politically inscribed but as equally the seat of agency and intentionality through emotion' (Dennis 2007:37).

Lutz and White (1986:408) suggest, '[t]he individual remains the ultimate seat of emotion [when] confronting a social and cultural pattern into or against which the emotions are placed'. Within rebirthing, it is the social and cultural patterns of the individual that are confronted. The experience of emotion is seen as a doorway to personal information, both internally and universally, and emotional expression is strongly encouraged to accelerate the rebirthing process. Rebirthing discourse explicitly and implicitly challenges notions of emotion as irrational (Lutz 1986:287). In practice, emotional freedom is seen as a strength; one that potentially facilitates awareness and change. Therefore any emotional response is validated as it is through emotional cues that the rebirthee can be supported to unravel their personal histories. For many participants this requires challenging and over-riding cultural and familial rules around emotional expression.

From a rebirthing perspective, emotions themselves are inscribed with the capacity to 'do things'. Ahmed (2004a:26-27, italics in original) argues that:

emotions *do things*, and work to align individuals with collectives – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments [and] we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and collective.

Emotions within the rebirthing field are understood to be the 'touchstones of personal reality' (Abu-Lughod 1990:24). Reflecting on Ahmed's (2004a:28) notion of emotion 'interweaving...the personal with the social, and the affective with the mediated,' from a rebirthing perspective emotions are seen as a resource with which to specifically explore these realms. Emotions work to *do* very specific 'things' within rebirthing. Uncomfortable emotions are seen as indicators of disharmony; either within the self or between the self

and the world. In this way, emotion acts as a signal. Emotions have agency such that during a rebirth, emotion experienced is seen as a guide to the source of disharmony, as well as an indication of its resolution, often expressed as 'peace' or 'bliss'. As such, emotions inform the individual and are critical to rebirthing practice, reflecting the proposal that '[e]motions are fundamental to human life; they define its quality and motivate action' (Milton 2005:98).

Within rebirthing, it is a combination of the embodied somatic/sensorial experience and emotional expression that the individual is able to penetrate their own past narratives. As British rebirther David Parker (2012b) suggests, '[p]eople have learnt, for whatever reason to "lock away" part of themselves, to avoid hidden aspects of their life, with resultant dis-ease of mind and body'. Paying attention to the embodied emotions and somatics during a rebirthing session enables the individual to 'release suppressed material...enhance aliveness..., let go of negativity and old obsolete thought patterns while exploring potential to move forward [and] encourage you to make your own choices in a positive way' (ibid.2012b). Through the conscious connected breathing pattern unlocking unconscious memory, rebirthing is seen to have the potential to facilitate new choices, change and ultimately personal transformation. Rebirthing implicitly and explicitly perceives the body as the source of information; that each person contains within themselves their own knowledge and answers, and the power to negotiate self-transformation. As spiritual beings, rebirthees are accorded full agency over the process, the spiritual self implicitly knowing the perfect course of the healing process. In this way they are 'able to release and resolve outdated thinking and behaviours and restore their lives to a more peaceful way of living' (Barter 2008)<sup>20</sup>.

Emotion is fully embodied within rebirthing. Like Barcan (2011:78) explains in *Complementary and Alternative Medicine*, '[t]he body is understood as holding and embodying emotional experience and thus, eventually, being patterned by it'. Recalling that rebirthing subscribes to a particular construction of the body—the body constructed as energy—within this energetic body, rebirthing defines emotion as 'e-motion' or 'energy-in-motion.' As such, embedded within rebirthing is the notion that past

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<sup>20</sup> Bronwyn Barter: Australian rebirther and trainer.

experiences leave an emotional memory within the body—from a rebirthing perspective, figuratively and literally embodied. This embodied energetic memory can be activated during the course of daily life or during rebirthing, stimulating an emotional response. Emotion, within rebirthing, is understood to be created by a thought pattern, for example, feeling happy as a result of thinking about happiness or feeling sad because of a loss. This thought sets off an energy-in-motion in the body, an emotion that is then 'felt' by the perceiver and labelled. Rebirthing practice then supports a cognitive process to locate the origin of the thought, reframe the experience, and/or initiate action as desired by the rebirthee. By bringing into conscious awareness the choices made from past experience and mentally reviewing them, informed choices for the future can be made. This nexus of past experience, memory, embodiment, perception and action is best illuminated by Kleinman and Kleinman (1991:293) who propose that:

We live in the flow of daily experience: we are intersubjective forms of memory and action. Our experiences are so completely integrated – narratized moments, transforming narratives – that the self is constituted out of visceral processes as much as expressed through them.

Considering a person as 'porous' produces a more nuanced site of self whereby 'we do not have a single coherent person performing different roles as demanded by a changing context, but rather a different person differently constituted in each of his or her interactions with others' (Smith 2012:5). This 'porous' subject best describes the particular concept of personhood that flows through rebirthing discourse and practice—a modern self reflected in the concepts of self/personhood embraced by the rebirthing community. The inherent flexibility of rebirthing that has traditionally picked and chosen from a wide *bricolage* of practices reproduces and incorporates that flexibility in the construction of personhood.

### **Breath: the rebirthing tool**

Having explored in the previous sections the connection between emotion and embodiment, this section is focussed on breathing/respiration and its relationship to the body and emotion. 'Nothing is more common to the diverse indigenous cultures of the earth than a recognition of the air, the wind, and the breath as aspects of a singularly

sacred power' (Abram 1996:336). Whilst the body can survive for weeks without food and days without fluids, any prolonged interruption to breathing will result in brain damage within minutes, and within a very short period, death. Breath, and breathing oxygenated air, is vital to life.

Breath has always been of interest in ancient cultures. Traditions arising Eastern are imbued with a focus on breath where '[b]reathing is used for healing and maintaining good health, as well as for spiritual advancement' (Minett 2004:47). In China, Qigong encompasses a range of breathing exercises coupled with slow body movements, 'Qi...(breathe, vapour, air)...[these] 'breathing techniques, with their emphasis on regularity, were developed for stabilizing the mind and appeasing the emotions' (Hsu 2007:S117). The Vipassana meditation of Buddhism, originating in India, utilises respiration as a means of focussing attention. Through 'observ[ing] bare respiration' (Goenka 1987:1) the mind is sharpened by concentrating on the sensation of breathing within the nostrils; an embodied experience that gives rise to a wide range of somatic and emotional responses. Yoga also arising from India, is a two-fold practice; body poses and breathing exercises that are called *prānāyāma*. 'Key to the practice of *prānāyāma* is both breathing and meditation, during which there is the visualization of air moving in the body and the experience of tactile sensations connected with the image' (Zysk 2007:S108). Common amongst these traditions is the use of respiration to focus the mind, awareness of sensation in the body, which includes emotional awareness. Within these traditions, detachment to the sensations in the body is the ultimate goal; 'you simply observe objectively, without identifying with the sensations' (Goenka 1987:18).

Respiration and breath is vital for communication via vocalisation. Abram (1996:227) refers to 'its obvious ties to speech—the sense that spoken words are structured breath'. As Ley (1999:442) succinctly summarises:

the frequency and intensity of the grunts and groans, cries and shrieks, sighs and gasps, and titter and laughter that are emitted in the oral language of everyday discourse and that convey a part of the emotional message that underlies the denotative meaning of our words are rooted in breathing.

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The embodied sensate physical act of communicating through air moving over vocal cords, breath manoeuvred by respiratory muscle movement, attest to the anatomical, intellectual, emotional interface of relating in one's social world. It is not only the spoken word but also noises and, in many instances, the silence that punctuates relationships. These silences—the lack of oral expression—can be just as powerful in interpersonal relationships. Pagis (2010:309) reflects on this 'intersubjectivity in silence' noting that whilst meditators at a silent retreat observe their own breath, the incidental noises of others breathing, coughing, and shuffling, potentially intrude.

I argue that the interconnectedness of emotion and respiration appears to be 'taken-for-granted' within our society. A child holds its breath until it lapses into unconsciousness after which the respiratory centre resumes its autonomic function. Grieving people will attempt to suppress their tears by holding their breath. Suppressing grief through holding back tears is often a social imperative. Fear results in a rapid shallow breathing pattern; a response that is automatic. These three examples demonstrate the unique capacity of the breath to be under both autonomic and conscious control as Ley (1999:441) reinforces. 'Breathing is the only vital function under direct voluntary control as well as involuntary control'.

Biomedicine generally maintains a mechanistic approach to respiration. The systemic approach not only focuses on the mechanics and physiology of respiration, but also uses this approach to the treatment of respiratory illnesses. Modification of breathing/respiration is most acute during the administration of a general anaesthetic. Once muscular paralysis is produced within the body, mechanical ventilation is required. Conscious modification of breathing is utilised post-operatively and on respiratory wards; in the case of post-operative recovery, to ensure the respiratory centre has regained its autonomous role. On a therapeutic level, '[m]ore comprehensive breathing training interventions are often embedded in pulmonary rehabilitation of patients with severe asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease' (Ritz & Roth 2003:711). The emotional connection to respiration is not acknowledged in this context, rather respiration modification is utilised to alter body states, namely, through the mechanical and physiological function of the lungs.

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There is limited research in psychology that links breathing directly to emotion despite the recognition that 'emotional arousal gives rise to changes in ventilation' (Ley 1999:460) Ley (1999:470) proposes 'the less commonly recognized fact that changes in breathing can lead to changes in emotion and cognition'. Most psychological research is related to the specific habitual breathing styles employing operant conditioning, in practice, to alter these patterns.

Research into breath modification in psychological literature includes; breathing exercises for the treatment of asthma (Ritz & Roth 2003); research on 'focused breathing' to assess the emotional responses to aversive and neutral picture slides (Arch & Craske 2006); the impact of conscious connected breathing, mindfulness and total relaxation on stress and anxiety levels (Lalande et al. 2012); treating panic disorders through breathing training (Meuret, Wilhelm, Ritz & Roth 2003); deep breathing as an entry into a meditative state (Hutcherson, Seppala & Gross 2008:721); and emotion regulation strategies (Subic-Wrana et al. 2014). Whilst 'the effects of thought on breathing' (Ley 1999:462) have been well documented, emotion as an embodied state in relation to respiration does not appear to play a strong role within psychology.

One exception is the paper by Lalande, Bambling, King and Lowe (2012), mentioned above, that explores breathwork in relation to depression and anxiety. Lalande et al (2012:3) propose:

psychopathology from a breathwork model perspective involves the suppression of feelings, sensations and emotions experienced as aversive and inhibition of breathing as a central mechanism through which suppression is achieved. The need for ongoing control and defence against awareness of troubling somatic and psychological experience...then results in a habitual, abnormal breathing pattern that becomes a more or less permanent feature of physiological functioning.

Therefore, they argue, that by the removal of breathing inhibitions through conscious connected breathing, relaxation and mindfulness, the suppressed material is brought 'into the general flow of consciousness' (Lalande et al. 2012:3).

Similarly little research and analysis into respiration/breathing has been undertaken in anthropology. Within anthropology, breath and breathing are taken-for-granted. Among

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the literature on breathing and respiration that I have located within anthropology, foci include: breath as a part of music making (Dennis 2007:94), the phenomenological experience of smoking (Dennis 2011:27), and altered respiration being an indicator of trance states (Herbert 2011:210). Ingold (2010:S121) and Lund (2005:38), in their articles on walking, make no reference to breathing or the embodied experience of breathing throughout these energetic walking activities. In reviewing the practice of yoga, Smith (2007:25) reflects, 'I maintain the quality of my breath, I feel my body settling and opening into the pose as I breathe' without further attention to the embodied or sensate experience of breath. Pagis (2010:318) focuses on the silence punctuated by human noises in a breath-focused silent meditation retreat. Within the literature of dance, I have not found any reference to the modification of respiration. The literature on trance, with its emphasis on rhythm, respiration is noticeably absent. Exceptions include Littlewood (2003:159) and Hutson (2000:40) who cite hyperventilation as one mechanism for inducing altered states. Besmer (1983:143) devotes a small section outlining the role of hyperventilation and hypoventilation in inducing trance states. Common amongst these anthropological texts is a focus on the sensual, embodied, phenomenological experience of breath and breathing rather than the relationship between breathing and emotion.

Rebirthing *is* the conscious connected breath cycle. Relaxation and mindfulness come secondary to the specific uninterrupted breathing pattern. It is a primary taken-for-granted principle within rebirthing that breathing and emotion are intrinsically co-constructive and are experienced in and by the body. The process of rebirthing itself relies on the nexus of emotion and bodily praxis of which breathing is an integral part. Whilst Minett (2004:13) proposes that 'we still lack an explanation of the effect which optimal breathing has on the body and psyche', rebirthing discourse argues that, through its specific breathing style, emotional states are experienced within the body and subconscious material can be accessed.

Within rebirthing, the conscious connected breathing cycle in rebirthing is understood to increase levels of oxygen in circulation, producing higher oxygen levels in the brain which leads to increased creativity and logic and improve the ability to solve problems. Rebirthing discourse proposes that breathing steadily calms the brain, and energy is freed up for the rest of the body to do more healing and repair. It is believed that

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rebirthing can also result in the release of memories stored in our body. As children, we learn through certain practices like breath holding or tensing the abdominal muscles, that we can suppress our emotions. So, when we experience stress, anxiety or pain we often restrict our breathing. According to the rebirthing model, restricting our oxygen intake, muscle tension and the low oxygen in the blood result in the suppressed emotion becoming 'stored' in the body. Rebirthing contends that re-oxygenation of the brain and body results in chemical changes in the body which then facilitates the accessing and releasing of these stored memories (Minett 2004:100-101) which are experienced somatically and/or emotionally.

The emotional and embodied experiences of the participants, as they venture through the training, provide a space for them to connect with one another. Whilst the conscious connected breathing cycle is used only during the rebirthing sessions, breath awareness occurs intermittently throughout the training. The group may be reminded to 'take a breath' by the trainer, specifically in those times of tension during which the breath is noticeably being suppressed. Gradually, as the participants become more aware of these moments, they will at times initiate the 'take a breath' command.

Rebirthing provides an alternative mode of human practice via the breath that stimulates and transforms the nexus of body, mind, and emotion. Controlling the breath, as in the conscious connected breath of rebirthing, is seen as a means of producing personal transformation: developing a model of personhood that is aware, flexible, and emotionally and physically healthy. Bo Wahlström, a Swedish breathworker explains:

In today's world many are so depressed that they lack energy to even start looking at their problems. They need more life energy in order to deal with their situation and to get inspired to initiate a change. They also need more energy in their bodies to be able to feel and experience themselves. You could say that the breath is our most unused natural resource that also contains the greatest potential for positive change. (Minett 2004:106)

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has explored anthropological stances on concepts of personhood from the dichotomy of the holistic 'East and the individualistic 'West' of Dumont (1980) to the

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'porous' human subject of Smith (2012). The 'porous' person depicts a personhood where self and identity are blurred, and are thus interchangeable within rebirthing discourse. In a similar manner, constructing the body as energy blurs the boundaries between the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects of personhood. This particular view of personhood within rebirthing provided an analytical tool for analysing the journeys of the participants as they undertake the rebirthing training. The co-constructing dynamics of emotion and embodiment as key features of the rebirthing process were explored within anthropology, and rebirthing understandings revealed. Emotion and its expression have been imbued with great power and significance within rebirthing, and emotion, in conjunction with somatic and sensorial attention, provides an embodied experience that enlightens the self through the rebirthing training and process. From a rebirthing perspective, it is through the rebirthing breath, the conscious connected breathing pattern, that the embodied and emotional realities are manifest. What will become evident through ethnography is the impact of culture and socialisation on the experience and expression of emotion. As greater emotional freedom is experienced by the participants, deeper understanding and resolution of suppressed material will occur.

Michael Sky (1990:126, italics in original) describes the purpose of rebirthing as follows:

Our patterns of contraction have long functioned as a form of protection, a literal suit of armor. That we no longer need the protection and that we are suffocating inside the armor does not seem to matter: we are accustomed to this way—it has worked for many years, and it *feels* safe.

To let go of our patterns of protection is to step out of the armor, naked and open to the world and all that it offers, this can be, to say the least, terrifying. However, we can only know how safe the world truly is, and how much love and support there is for each of us, by facing life *without the armor*.

The journey begins in the next chapter, where the initial interviews prior to commencing training are analysed and the training itself begins.

## 3

# The Beginning: Holding the Space

## Introduction

Salman Rushdie (1992:12) asserts that meaning, for human beings, is 'a shaky edifice we build out of scraps, dogmas, childhood injuries, newspaper articles, chance remarks, old films, small victories, people hated, people loved'. As the rebirthing training unfolds, the material that has contributed to their sense of personhood is revealed. Through the training, by exploring and challenging the 'shaky edifice', the participants are provided with an opportunity to deconstruct and reconstruct new concepts of self, personhood, and relationships. In this chapter, I introduce the main participants and informants of my fieldwork, utilising their initial interviews to ascertain their reasons for choosing this rebirthing training course.

Six people have elected to undertake this nine-month rebirthing training; a decision not taken lightly considering the significant financial commitment and the explicit understanding that their notions of self-hood, their beliefs and values will be under scrutiny. The first weekend of the training is an introductory weekend during which the group first meet each other. As such, the participants enter the training with heightened levels of awareness and emotional tension.

This chapter examines the metaphorical and literal 'holding of space' so that their spirit can run the program. The structure of the training is specifically designed, both spatially and temporally, to ameliorate the initial responses of the participants. I shall explore in detail and analyse how the construction of the training is designed to ensure maximum safety to promote trust and honesty within the group reflecting a rebirthing concept: 'holding the space'. This concept is introduced to the new participants as they begin the process of learning to become rebirthers and undergo their first rebirth in this new environment.

## Who Chooses Rebirthing?: the participants

The training team comprises of the trainer Margaret, and three voluntary assistants: Cathy, Sam and Zoe. The six participants who become my primary informants are Gaylene, Jonathon, Lily, Paul, Robyn and Simon. Prior to the commencement of the training, I conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with these participants. I had arranged these interviews to address any further queries they had about my role as a participant/observer within the training, to establish rapport as most I had not met before, and to glean some initial information from each participant. This included how they first became involved in rebirthing, and why they elected to undertake the training.

My first informant was a man in his early fifties and tertiary educated. I was quite nervous with this being my first interview. However Paul was most forthright.

*Whilst being involved in a class action<sup>21</sup> I went to a therapist. I did counselling and anti-depressants. But I felt like I just wasn't shifting at all. So by the time I got to my new doctor Susan, I was physically a wreck. I was fucked in the head and my body was more twisted than Stephen Hawking really.*

Paul had developed an auto-immune disease that has manifested as crippling pain in his joints.

*I was saying I don't want to go back into counselling. I think all my life I've been really good at being an academic, intellectualising everything, I've never let myself feel it and deal with the feelings. I spent ten years in a psychiatrist's chair, once a week. But I don't know why, the core of it never shifted. I did weekly visits to a counsellor for three years because I just had to. But in terms of shifting what was happening inside, it didn't create much change.*

Paul finally reached a stage with his physical and emotional problems where he was willing to try anything. His GP suggested that he could consider rebirthing.

*I've gone into rebirthing because there's a series of monsters from my childhood which adversely affect my view of myself and my ability to get on with an ok life. As I grew through my teens, my father was embarrassed by my sexual persuasion (homosexuality) and my political beliefs which weren't resolved until he was dying. By the time I started the rebirthing I*

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<sup>21</sup> The class action was against a Church related to child-sex abuse within the institution.

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*had no sense of me. My work ethic had contributed to taking over who I was; I was one of those people who defined my success by my career. And I had been totally splintered by the judicial process I had been involved in for the past three years. As a result of the class action, where I'd become very cynical and quite evaluative of other people's behaviour, I had become a social isolate. I'd emotionally closed down; I lost sight of who I was—what I believed in. I've committed to the training to get more of what I've got with my rebirthing with Margaret.*

After raising a family, Robyn went to university and commenced working as a teacher. In her late fifties, she told me why she decided to participate in the nine-month rebirthing training.

*Before I started rebirthing, my identity was wrapped up in all my different roles. So for me I knew how to be a mum, I knew how to be a daughter, a teacher, a wife. I felt I didn't have any choice but to lead the traditional life my parents instilled in me from a young age—'girls don't do that, girls do this'. I remember vividly that although I had three brothers I noticed that I was separate. I had a separate bedroom and I was expected to clean the bathroom while they weren't, and I was expected to look after them. My parents role-modelled it, especially my mother who didn't do anything outside of her role. So my sense of identity came from family, their values and traditions. I guess rebirthing's impacted on my life which is my thinking, my attitude, my willingness to do different things. It seems to get rid of whatever pent-up fear or emotion or past experiences which are stopping me from doing something else and I want to know more about it. I'm frustrated at work and need to make a decision about it. But I don't know what to do instead.*

Jonathon introduced himself as 'a fifty-six year old American, a practicing Buddhist and a reiki practitioner'.

*Reiki for me was the first amazing thing that set me off on this tangent of spiritual healing and questioning and all of that. As a reiki practitioner, I need to be clear<sup>22</sup> with myself so I can be clear with clients. So I started rebirthing because I'd been told by friends that it was really clearing, really powerful stuff. I've been very afraid, of life, afraid of myself. I buried myself in books from a really young age and I realise that's what I literally did to escape. And I got 100% approval from my parents and teachers while I was sitting and reading. I do remember being knocked down by my sister when I was about six. From that moment I told myself to back away from conflict and I did. Coupled with that, my father was a very angry man which I didn't like because it scared me. As a result, I was a very good observer and I listened a lot, but I never got involved in conflict. Any chance of excitement, of having fun or doing something adventurous I'd just back away from it because it was safer. That comes from my mother. I've learned a lot from her, keeping us kids safe. Before starting rebirthing several years ago, I just saw myself as a shy naïve little Jewish Buddhist gay person, and I use those labels humorously but I really think that's who I was.*

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<sup>22</sup> An expression commonly used within New Age/personal development frameworks whereby negative energy is permanently removed from all levels of the human energy field.

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Also in her mid-fifties, Gaylene has raised two children, one of whom still lives at home. Currently on leave from her job as a schoolteacher, Gaylene described her health issues:

*I have Meniere's disease which causes violent dizzy spells. Consequently I suffer a lot of anxiety, especially when I go out in public in case I have a dizzy spell. I was reading a book about agoraphobics about how to conquer their panic attacks, and that was about stillness and learning how to breathe. My chiropractor recommended rebirthing; she said her mum's benefitted so much from this breathwork and rebirthing.*

The physical effects of Meniere's disease resulted in emotional issues for Gaylene, manifesting through anxiety and an inability to work.

*I'm just totally worn out. I want to get in touch with myself, not being happy with the old me and not quite knowing what the new me's going to be. I was a very scared child. And as an adult I still have that fear but I've learnt how to cover it up a lot of the time. It happened because I wasn't confident enough to speak up for myself or the few times that I did I got squashed. That might have been parents or teachers or other children. That was just a repetitive experience of mine. So I just learnt to go within, keeping myself tight to my chest, and being careful about getting too close to people feeling that they would probably reject me or belittle me.*

In his late thirties Simon, a plasterer, shared his 'life crisis' that led to his experiences with rebirthing.

*I got Amelia<sup>23</sup> pregnant and I was a bit panicked so on my sister's advice I went to Margaret's for a rebirth. Nothing really happened to me in the breathing bit; I just listened to the woowoo music<sup>24</sup>. Then earlier this year, I was starting uni and I wanted to stop drinking. So I rang Margaret up and went back again. Then she suggested I think about doing the training. I had been reading a few books and listening to audio books but I wasn't applying it properly. I'd locked up my past and I was getting mad at doing the same old things. I wanted some more serious change in my life and it's different doing it with a group. So I decided to do the training.*

At twenty-six, Lily was by far the youngest participant. Tertiary educated, she won a position in a project management team for a large private firm.

*I've known about rebirthing since I was about six years old. It's always been in my life through my parents doing the training and talking about rebirthing and their experiences so it's sort of a normal part of my life. My husband and I started having major problems last year.*

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<sup>23</sup> Amelia is the estranged mother of his two-year-old son.

<sup>24</sup> New Age music is played during rebirthing sessions often using natural sounds. The music should avoid regular beats or melody lines that could potentially distract the rebirthee.

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*There were some recurring themes that came up for me, and I felt I needed to address them and move on so I could have a much happier and more productive relationship with my husband. There were old patterns coming up over and over again. I feel a lot of this comes from my family of birth. However I also have this new identity within my marriage and I am still trying to find my way in that relationship. So I see myself as a sort of creation of everyone else's personalities and lives and I still struggle with finding myself and what I want and who I am and what my goals are. I decided to do the training for personal growth as opposed to becoming a rebirther.*

These initial interviews revealed stories of life crises through the voices of my informants. Silverman (1967:127) reflects: '[I]f life crises may be taken to mean those periods in the life span at which there is some interruption in continuity...at which there is regularly expected individual stress'. Each participant is expressing dissatisfaction with their life that has led to an 'interruption in continuity' necessitating them to change in some way. Simon's life crisis has been precipitated by unplanned pregnancy. Recognition of his emotional distress and resultant hermitic existence has driven Paul to try an alternative modality. For Robyn and Gaylene, their children have reached adulthood and their roles as mothers are changing. Gaylene is faced with the added challenge of having to take leave from work due to ill health and she expresses a need to 'get in touch' with herself. With her working life coming to a close, Robyn wants to challenge herself with alternative options in the future—both her identity and to 'do different things'. Within her recent marriage, Lily recognises that she has a new unfamiliar role, one that has challenged her previous perceptions of herself and brings to the fore how these perceptions have been constructed from external influences. Jonathon identifies using rebirthing as a driver for 'clearing' himself to better facilitate his reiki practice. Later in the conversation he reflects on how his particular family has influenced his sense of self. Likewise, other participants reveal thoughts about their sense of identity, consistently reflecting on their birth families as being a major influence on their self-perception. What is evident in all their accounts is a sense of seeking: seeking change for themselves and questioning how that change may be achieved. It is through the rebirthing training that the participants are anticipating creating new self-perceptions and new directions in their lives.

What is also evident in these accounts is a particular mode of language: 'shifting what was happening inside'; 'emotionally closed down'; 'need to be clear'; 'clearing, really powerful stuff', 'get rid of whatever pent up fear or emotion or past experiences'; 'old

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patterns coming up'. As Ahearn (2001:120) suggests, observing language facilitates 'a more thorough understanding of how people reproduce and transform both language and culture'. Prior to the commencement of the training, the participants are reproducing the language of rebirthing and the wider alternative healing field—evidence of a familiarity with this terminology and that the New Age/personal development field is already embedded in their everyday experiences. However, it is through the modality of rebirthing, and the rebirthing training, that this group of people has chosen to explore their sense of self and produce personal transformation. What becomes evident to me as I undertake the pre-training interviews is a sense of excitement, of possibilities for the training and their futures, all tinged with a small dose of apprehension that has grown into fear and anxiety by the time I meet them again.

It is the first evening of the new rebirthing training. I am in Margaret's kitchen, part of an open-plan area encompassing kitchen, dining area and lounge. The three assistants, quite nervously, await the arrival of the new participants. The water in the urn is heated, mugs and a choice of coffees and teas are available, and a plate of fresh fruit and a bowl of nuts sit on the dining table. The three assistants and I have been coached to greet the new arrivals sensitively, knowing that they will be in various emotional states when they first arrive. Tonight the participants will step through Margaret's front door, symbolic of the spatial and psychological separation from their previous lives, leaving their familiar world behind to embark upon a nine-month journey of self-discovery.

Whilst the three assistants are anxiously huddled in the kitchen, Margaret and I greet the new arrivals and invite them to make themselves a cup of tea or coffee. Lily appears to be quite comfortable. She has been a regular client of Margaret's for some years and has been to numerous workshops in personal development. Paul stands silently in the background, appearing composed; however, I find out later that he was terrified. Robyn looks panic-stricken, like a rabbit in the spotlight. Gaylene is barely breathing, her jaw jutting out, scanning the room, while Simon is jocular and sweating profusely. Jonathon is also very quiet, wary; the tension in the air is palpable. Margaret comments later, 'they're always like that. They're terrified'. Dunham, Kidwell and Wilson (1986:143) describe this state as 'a period of acute awareness and even alarm prior to restructuring the self in the new role'. Such fear would be expected in light of the process the

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participants are about to undertake, moving out of their normal everyday lives and stepping into the unfamiliar space of the rebirthing training. The first session of the rebirthing training starts.

Margaret begins the program by introducing herself and sharing a brief synopsis of her life history. She tells me in a private interview, 'I do that so by hearing my story, the new participants may feel more relaxed knowing that I have had ups and downs in my life similar to them, and therefore I can show them that I am no different'. Following her personal introduction, Margaret presents the participants with a handout of Class Agreements (see Appendix 1). These agreements define the parameters of the training, and are discussed and agreed upon before the training continues. Of paramount importance, according to Margaret, is the agreement of confidentiality as 'it is most important to establish confidentiality as soon as possible on the first night' (Trainers Manual, Unit One: 6). Margaret then invites the students to stand up and introduce themselves to the group. The topics to be covered are a short life history, why they're undertaking the rebirthing training, and their greatest fear. One by one they stand in front of this group of relative strangers. Heightened emotion is evident in their voices and their bodies. Voices crackle, nervous titters, rigid stances and nervous fidgeting are amongst the displays. The fear and anxiety in the room is palpable; tears are shed as the stories are told. I am unable to suppress my own emotional response. I am also fearful and anxious about the responsibility of the trust these participants have placed in me. I forget to record or take notes; I am quite distracted from my role as an anthropologist and therefore organise one-on-one interviews with all the participants in the following weeks.

In these private interviews, the participants reflect on their responses. Emotions, particularly fear, feature most strongly. Paul had been the first to stand up.

*I was terrified. I knew that if I didn't get up straight away and introduce myself, I would slip into an even bigger state of fear. I wanted to 'out' myself straight away as I didn't want it to be a topic in this group. I was physically and emotionally exhausted from managing a class action against the church for sexual abuse and my way of coping with it was by withdrawing from the world and developing a little slice of heaven in my back yard. I'd been having panic attacks, and I'd been living in fear, not knowing what the fear was about. I was just emotionally exhausted. My greatest fear was just staying the hermit, staying stuck with the fear.*

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Unlike Paul, who was totally open about revealing his homosexuality, Jonathon shared:

*My greatest fear was really being open<sup>25</sup> and honest because I never said anything to anybody, particularly being gay. I was always the one who had the joke or made people laugh to cover up my fear and insecurity. I was always putting other people down so they didn't look at me and I wouldn't have to deal with anything. My greatest fear was knowing that I was going to have to do all of that because it meant so much for my healing. So when Paul got up and said he was gay to the group, it just changed the whole nine months for me, that moment was really quite an awakening.*

'My greatest fear,' according to Gaylene, 'was about wanting to change and not knowing how to go about it, not really knowing what I wanted to change into. But I knew I wanted to be different.'

*Robyn: I knew I had lots of fear, but I couldn't define the fear. I know that new experiences of confronting people are fearful for me, and for me there were multiple fears that were complex, so I think I lied. I had to get over the barrier of expressing my feelings truly, and that relates to being criticised. So I admit that the fears that I had at the time around my emotions and showing them were not okay.*

For Lily, her fear when introducing herself was

*being vulnerable in front of people I wasn't sure I was comfortable with. I had just met them; actually being vulnerable with strangers. I felt a bit intimidated being the youngest in the group by a long way. I felt as though they had so much more life experience and as I'd had quite a privileged life that they would make judgements about me. At the same time I was questioning myself as to how I was going to contribute, how I was going to fit into this group and whether I had anything of value to add.*

Last to introduce himself was Simon. His infectious personality and jovial recounting of his fears invited the group to join in with his laughter.

*I'm really quite cynical about this rebirthing stuff. I don't think it has really turned my brother and sister into better people, in fact I find them really irritating. I remember saying my greatest fear is turning into some kind of fruit cake, or being worse off than I am already as a result of doing this stuff. It's like it is a bit of a cult really. But then, as my life is pretty fucked at the moment, I suppose it can't get too much worse really.*

It is evident in the disclosures that each participant has commenced a process of transformation or change. Simon's unplanned pregnancy or Lily's negotiation of her

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<sup>25</sup> Being 'open' is a common term within the rebirthing lexicon to indicate an emotional availability and stands in contrast to being 'shut down'.

identity within a new marriage may be described as acute episodes of life-crises. More chronic life-crises are experienced by Paul and his desire to change his hermitic life, and Robyn and Gaylene who are seeking new ways 'of being' after raising families and working. Furthermore, finding a means of being more emotionally honest and open is the change that Jonathon and Robyn are seeking in their own unique ways. It is also apparent that the quality of that change is unknown and elusive at the beginning of this new stage in their lives. Simon, whilst looking for change in his life, remains cynical that rebirthing is the tool for him to achieve that change. The participants also verbalise that the anticipated yet uncharted process of change and transformation further exacerbates their anxiety and fear—the fear of being stuck in the old ways, fear of revealing themselves with all their vulnerabilities, fear of negative changes as expressed by Simon. Summarised, it would appear that these fears are driven by fear of the unknown, particularly other people and of the consequences of exposing themselves.

This emotional response ranging from fear, anxiety and panic, evident in their initial interviews, is one that is expected by Margaret as these people step out of their known lives into a rebirthing training—out of their 'comfort zones'<sup>26</sup> into liminality. During this training the participants are moving into a liminal state 'betwixt and between' (Turner, V 1969:95) their common everyday lives and the locale of the rebirthing training. Each participant, in their initial interview, has articulated the change or transformation that they are seeking by undertaking this rebirthing training. As Lewis (2008:129) states, 'the function of the liminal space is to deconstruct one's former identity so he or she may acquire knowledge and training necessary to move fully to a state or identity'. Dunham et al (1986:146-147) elaborate by proposing:

It is through separation that liminality is produced through placing the initiate into a marginal state, having to relinquish the old ways of being and being subjected to unfamiliar environmental stresses. Anxiety and fear is activated accompanied by a preoccupation with this new state of crisis. Having been removed from their old identity, the new one has yet to be formed.

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<sup>26</sup> Comfort zones are patterns of behaviour that people adopt in order to keep themselves safe. Familiar behaviour and surroundings are described as 'comfort zones' of a person's life. (Participant Manual One: 5)

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This period of separation requires 'new environmental demands,' which is destabilising with its attendant 'new social pressures' (ibid.:146). The movement into the liminal space is accompanied by fear and anxiety. The 'sense of liminality, with its inner *communitas*, turns out to be one of the most common examples of change of consciousness, much appreciated wherever it is found, and then taken for granted by participants' (Turner, E 2006:38). It is in this state of liminality that the change and transformation that the participants so desire can take place. For the rebirthing training, the normal parameters of social engagement are put on hold and an alternative spatial and temporal environment, a liminal space, is created for the participants to explore their personal journey. Within this liminal space, the participants are presented with opportunities to challenge their previous perceptions of themselves, the beliefs and values they have accumulated within their lifetimes. They will be challenged to step out of their comfort zones and explore new ways of being, and incorporate these into their external lives.

In traditional rites of passage, particularly initiation rites where liminality is 'frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to darkness...to the wilderness' (Turner, V 1969:95), the neophyte is maintained in their state of fear of the unknown, the space is kept unsafe and the neophyte remains 'submissive and silent' (ibid.:103). However, for the rebirthing training, this liminal space is inverted for rebirthing trainees and is constructed to create a sense of safety to facilitate their transformations. Rather than being submissive and silent, it is anticipated that the participants will challenge their comfort zones and feel safe enough to explore and speak of their experiences. At the beginning of the training, the space is unknown and thus unsafe for the participants. As levels of trust and feelings of safety increase, the external world is then often perceived as the 'unsafe' space. It is in this external, now unsafe, space to which they return and where they are required to practice their new learnings outside of the increasing safety of the rebirthing training.

The rebirthing training is specifically structured both spatially and temporally to create this sense of safety. As the training progresses, it is anticipated that an increasing sense of safety will be reflected in the experiences of the participants. As they delve deeper into their own journeys, it is anticipated that their new knowledge gained will guide and assist their transformational process.

Margaret describes 'holding the space' as follows:

*The space for whatever you're doing is always set up first to make sure that it is appropriate for what's happening. Then holding the space is a way of describing that you have a very strong intention that the space for your clients or your students is encapsulated so it's safe enough for them to be able to express themselves; there are no outward influences so there's nothing to distract them from the process. And you're sending out that intention that you're 100% there for them.*

### **'They need to feel safe enough to be honest'**

From the rebirthing training perspective, safety and honesty are of paramount importance. The agreements that have been put into place to ensure confidentiality are anticipated to contribute to feelings of safety. Added to this, is the creation of a space in which the participants feel safe enough to be honest with themselves and each other.

Anthropological literature is replete with wide-ranging theories of place and space (Basso 1996; Casey 1976; Gupta & Ferguson 1992; Relph 2008; Warin et al. 2000).

Within the context of this thesis I draw on Gray's (2000:9) view of space and place:

In this sense, then, I am reserving the notion of space for the location or setting that people experience as largely externally produced and that acts as a medium or constraining setting for their everyday actions. The notion of place is reserved for the personally, socially, and/or historically meaningful location that people experience as the outcome of their own actions.

Extrapolating from Gray's definition, the location of the training—Margaret's home—appeals to a personal and social concept of place. Socially, her home adds a degree of intimacy for the participants not available in commercial properties that Margaret has used in the past. Personally, by tapping into the relationship between the participants' concepts of home, a 'consciousness [that] relates to home, where people feel 'in place' rather than 'dis-placed'"(Kearns 1991:519) may be invoked.

Within the context of this thesis, I designate place as being the physical construct that contains and influences how space is perceived; space being 'amorphous and intangible and not an entity that can be directly described and analysed' (Relph 2008:8). I describe the specific actions undertaken by Margaret to produce a particular space within the

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home environment. However, whilst these activities are intended to influence emotionally, sensorially, intellectually, and subsequently the actions of the participants during the training, the details of those effects are not so easily identifiable.

The construction of space within the rebirthing training is intentional in that a wide range of senses are incorporated into the constitution of that very specific space in a way that promotes familiarity and safety. Margaret imbues her house with a range of spatial and sensorial anchors. Over time, the expectation is that the participants, through assimilating into their physical and social bodies the experiences of these spatial and sensorial constructs, readily adjust to the rebirthing training space each time they enter it. Relph (2008:10) describes this type of space as 'perceptual space [which] is a space that has content and meaning, for it cannot be divorced from experience and intentions'. By reproducing the same components, spatially and sensorially, for the duration of the training, the participants' sense of safety is mutually incubated and reinforced.

The house is a modern air-conditioned home set in a new development. The front garden is small and neat, and the front door is approached by passing the double garage doors and walking along the front verandah. The door is nondescript, wood-veneer, and painted beige. The only feature out of the ordinary is the stick of incense poked into the crack between two bricks, the scent of which can be detected from the footpath. For Margaret, the space in which she practices and trains is critical—that it is physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually supportive to an exacting degree of excellence. Ensuring sufficient privacy for her partner Bob maintains privacy for the participants. Criteria for the house include cleanliness, airiness, temperature control, and being spatially arranged so that the assistants can prepare the wholesome, mostly vegetarian lunch without disturbing the training.

Throughout the training Margaret provides hot beverages with snacks such as fresh fruit and nuts, and a lunch time meal on Saturday. All food and beverages are fresh, nutritious, and bountiful; stimulating the sense of taste as well as nurturing through sustenance. The Sunday lunch is a shared lunch with each participant contributing—a collective process of sharing food. The expectation is that the participants put some

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thought and effort into their contribution, an opportunity to demonstrate care and respect for one another, according to Margaret.

At an assistants' meeting prior to the training commencing, Margaret says:

*We all have a responsibility to do as much as possible to make this training safe for the participants. They need to feel safe enough to be honest with themselves and the group. That way they will get the most out of the training. So the training is intentionally set up this way to create a familiar and predictable space that, over time, will provide a safe environment both physically and emotionally in which the participants can maximise the opportunity to confront and change what it is that they have identified.*

Within rebirthing, the process of growth and change is emotionally and intellectually challenging and for many participants, this process feels most unsafe. In this context, the construction of a safe environment is believed to promote honesty amongst the participants and to minimise the stress of confrontation and change.

Whilst safety and honesty are equated spatially, Margaret also explains to me how she creates a sense of safety through the invariable nature of this space. The constant unchanging spatial arrangements ensure familiarity for the participants that maintain the sense of safety. This visually static environment is just one aspect of the multisensory nature of this construction. Structurally, the house is partitioned by Margaret, and certain areas are designated as private areas for Margaret and her husband. These include their offices, bedrooms and their personal bathroom. The designated training room is at the rear of the house providing 'a distinction...between 'social space' and 'therapeutic space' (Tune 2001:167). However, I observe this distinction being blurred on occasions. Whilst the training room generally maintains its purpose, at times, other available spaces within the house are transformed temporarily into therapeutic spaces; either for course activities or impromptu therapeutic sessions between Margaret and a participant.

The 'safe space' is enhanced by what Margaret calls a series of small rituals, which are sensorial in nature. 'Rituals and repetitive processes [are] a means of creating a common feeling in all' (Trainers Manual Unit One: 6). Sticks of incense are dotted throughout the house, particularly the training room, providing an olfactory memory that is evoked by the incense at the front door. In the training room, a large candle in a glass

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urn is resting on a layer of pebbles and is lit every morning of the training prior to the participants arriving. Background music between training sessions provide ongoing ambiance. The beginning of each session is indicated by the ringing of Tibetan bells: two small brass discs connected by a leather cord when gently hit against one another emit a gentle yet penetrating ringing sound. As the incense provides an olfactory memory, the Tibetan bells provide an auditory memory. The sharing of food at lunch time suggests common gustatory sensations.

At the start and close of each day Margaret selects a song—one which is familiar and contemporary and reflects the theme of the weekend. The entire group stand in a circle within the training room and sing together from the song sheets handed out by an assistant. Margaret explains to me that ‘as a ‘ritual’, singing ensures that people breathe together facilitating entrainment’.<sup>27</sup> She adds, ‘when they breathe in sync with one another, it creates a sense of familiarity and belonging’. In her book *Police Beat*, Simone Dennis (2007:xx) draws on the work of Alfred Shultz *Making Music Together* in which he described the ‘mutual tuning in relationship’ that he considered took place between people making music together’. In the same way, singing together produces this ‘mutual tuning in relationship’ and becomes inter-relational—an intersubjective as well as a subjective experience. The song is then followed by each person in the room personally greeting and giving each other a ‘hug’. As the trainer points out, these activities contribute to promoting a powerful sense of community and as the rebirthing training progresses, the relationships between the participants become increasingly co-supportive as their trust levels increase. The group dynamic is understood to become increasingly powerful for healing as the shared experiences, insights and understandings further bond the group.

These rituals reflect, in some way, rituals that take place in religious settings: the lighting of the candle, the use of incense, communal singing. As Margaret iterates, ‘rebirthing is a spiritual process and for me, it is important that the space is set up and maintained as a spiritual environment’. Drawing on the construction of self as a reincarnated spiritual being, as explored in the previous chapter, the process of change through rebirthing is

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<sup>27</sup> Entrainment is ‘the adjustment of the pace or cycle of one activity to match or synchronize with that of another’ (Ancona & Chong 1996:251).

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also viewed as a spiritual process: 'spiritual practices based in the *body* — where the senses are not seen as obstacles to spiritual development...but as a pathway to it' (Barcan 2011:4, italics in original). The individual is understood within rebirthing to connect with their own spiritual capacity to explore, reveal, negotiate, renegotiate, release, and ultimately rewrite their past history and create their future. This capacity is reflected in Tacey's (2003: 31) proposal that '[s]pirit is felt to be spontaneous, freely available and democratically structured...[s]pirit is felt to be holistic and urging us towards wholeness and completion'. The training is understood to be an extension of the practice of rebirthing and as such, is also perceived as spiritual in nature. Margaret's attention to the details of the training space, in her view, reflects the positioning of rebirthing's spiritual nature.

These activities by Margaret, from electing to conduct the rebirthing training in her home to the detailed attention given to the structural and sensorial elements has not only a subjective but also an intersubjective impact on all those present. Hastrup (2010:203) argues that:

Space affects intersubjectivity deeply, because intersubjectivity is embedded in place [that] is not simply a matter of relationships between persons but involves relations between people and places and ideas about places.

By the production a 'safe space' within the confines of a home, Margaret anticipates softening the impact of the challenges the participants are about to face through the training. Not only will they have a subjective experience of the space, but also as a group activity where little space is available for being alone, the participants experience the space intersubjectively. Implicit within the training, the 'safe space' and the embedded rituals support the intersubjective experiences of the participants as they draw and reflect on their own and each one's personal journey, and negotiate their relationships.

It is within this 'safe space' that the participants will be challenged to confront themselves and begin the process of self-transformation. This requires change and as Margaret (Participant Manual, Unit One: 20) writes:

Change is uncomfortable due to the fact that human beings are so attracted to ease and comfort. Change causes mental, physical and/or emotional discomfort.

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It is like a hard work out; it causes discomfort and pain but you know that it's good for you. It's the same with personal growth.

As the training progresses, it is expected that the participants will feel unsafe. Simple things, like singing songs or hugging each other, for many people are certainly uncomfortable. Consequently, from the beginning of the training, a tension always exists between safety and discomfort. The participants need to feel safe enough to, at times, take personal risks to facilitate the change they are seeking. Margaret confides, 'I have to make it comfortable and safe as possible because what happens in the training is that they will be very challenged: physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually.'

Warin et al (2000:1864) suggest that 'time and space are socially constructed dimensions'. It is not only the construction of space that creates a sense of safety; time within the rebirthing training is also regulated and predictable. Having reviewed the spatial arrangements, temporal aspects are also constructed to facilitate and maximise the participants' opportunities for insight and change.

The rebirthing training itself takes place over a nine-month period; coincidentally,<sup>28</sup> the length of gestation for a human foetus. The training is constructed of nine weekend sessions held monthly, with each weekend covering a major topic: Week One—Introduction to Rebirthing, Week Two—Birth and Conception, Week Three—Parental Disapproval Syndrome, Week Four—Education, Week Five—Fear, Week Six—Money, Week Seven—Sexuality and Relationships, Week Eight—God, Death and Immortality, Week Nine—Completion Weekend. Each weekend starts on Friday night at 6pm, finishing at 10pm. Saturday and Sunday run from 9am to 6pm. Midway between each month the group gathers together for one evening to practice their rebirthing techniques. The mid-month session starts at 6.30pm and finishes at 10. Punctuality is important; as Margaret states it is required for the smooth running of the training. She prompts them on the first weekend: 'late is late, early is early, on time is on time.'

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<sup>28</sup> In previous trainings, the nine weekends had been spaced fortnightly. It was when the trainer decided to hold the weekends monthly with the extra mid-month session included that she made the connection between the lengths of the training and the gestation of a human foetus.

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The structure of each weekend follows a regular pattern. On the Friday night at 6pm, the assistants and the trainer will already be present with the space set up for the training to begin. Once all the participants have arrived, the Tibetan bells are rung indicating the session is about to begin. As mentioned earlier, each evening or day starts with a song, and hugs. These activities are then followed by a group 'share'. This term 'share' arises regularly throughout this thesis. During this time the participants, followed by the assistants and finally the trainer, all 'share' what has been 'happening' for them since the last session. This may include social activities, emotional episodes, physical challenges, realisations that they have made, changes they may have instituted and resultant outcomes. The trainer then introduces the theme for the weekend, focussing on rebirthing theory. Friday evening is completed with another song and hugs to say goodbye.

The Saturday and Sunday sessions all start and finish with the ritual song, hug and share. Rebirthing theory on the specific topic for the weekend is presented on Saturday morning. These sessions, like the whole training, are flexible enough to cater for questions and discussion, and to hopefully alleviate any confusion. Saturday afternoon entails experiential learning<sup>29</sup> to expose, explore, and enlighten the participants' personal experiences of the weekend topic. In the rebirthing training, experiential learning is facilitated through 'processes' to stimulate the group. The word 'process' is used in a variety of ways. Specific games/activities or 'processes' are included in the training to stimulate subjective bodily emotional responses, leading participants to come to their own awareness and realisations. Participants may also talk about themselves being in 'process' or 'processing' through something. The training is described as a 'process'—a nine-month process reflective of the liminality of the training. Throughout this time, the participants are regularly reminded that they are in 'a process', a state of change and transformation that will be emotionally, mentally, physically and spiritually unsettling. Any process throughout the training is always followed by a debriefing session.

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<sup>29</sup> Experiential learning is a term used within rebirthing to describe a 'process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb, DA 1984:41) and involves a potentially ongoing cycle of 'experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting' (Kolb, AY & Kolb 2005:194).

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There is invariably a longer share on Sunday morning as the participants have had time to ruminate and reflect on the previous day's information and activities, and their reactions to them. After Sunday lunch, the participants pair up and 'sit' with each other for a rebirth and post-rebirth debriefing session. To 'sit' in rebirthing is the term used for the rebirther who 'sits' next to and supports the rebirthee during their breathing session. At the completion of these rebirths, a post-rebirth debriefing session is facilitated. The final activity prior to going home Sunday evening is the 'pairing up' of the participants by Margaret as she draws names out of a pre-prepared box. Called the 'buddy system', each couple are instructed to keep in daily contact, most commonly by telephone. In this way Margaret proposes they provide ongoing support to each other through this liminal period. At the same time, bonds between the participants may develop or conversely, issues of relationality will be exposed. They are allocated new buddies on the Sunday of the training weekends and after the mid-month get-together. After the participants leave on the Sunday evening, the assistants clean up and have a final debrief before going home.

As Margaret explains, by following the same format, the group can relax knowing the routine of the training. As familiarity and intimacy increases, issues that participants may have in relating to others is brought to the fore. The focus on relationships is paramount from the start of the training—their capacity to be honest within the training, their relationship with themselves, the new relationships being forged within the training, and the impact of the training on their personal relationships. To achieve this, Margaret's major focus for the introductory weekend is safety: physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual. As '[i]n a lived world [where] spatial and temporal dimensions cannot be disentangled, and the two commingle in various ways' (Munn 1992:94), the temporal and spatial co-construction of this 'safe space' for the rebirthing training is designed to support the new participants in challenging and managing their learning process. The expectation is that, as the trust and honesty builds within and between the participants, they will gradually awaken to their 'issues,' access their emotions more fully, feel safer in expressing them and thus increase their opportunity for achieving their personal goals as expressed in their initial interviews.

This initial weekend of the rebirthing training is one in which the parameters of the training, both spatially and temporally, are primarily constructed to facilitate the easing of these neophytes into the training. By introducing themselves to the group on the first evening, the participants begin the process of revealing themselves to each other, sharing personal stories, knowledge and building trust. The emotional response—chiefly potent fear in the participants at this early stage—is evident. Time is spent discussing the discomfort of change that requires, at times, the participants to ‘step out of their comfort zones’. The Sunday is spent primarily discussing the process of rebirthing culminating in a ‘group rebirth’.<sup>30</sup>

### **‘Anything is possible during a rebirth’**

Margaret begins her teaching about rebirthing by stressing that ‘rebirthing helps people to confront things. Most people come to rebirthing because they are upset and often teary. The ARCU break<sup>31</sup> is very easy to understand and can be used to explain their upset’. Margaret draws a triangle on the flipchart.

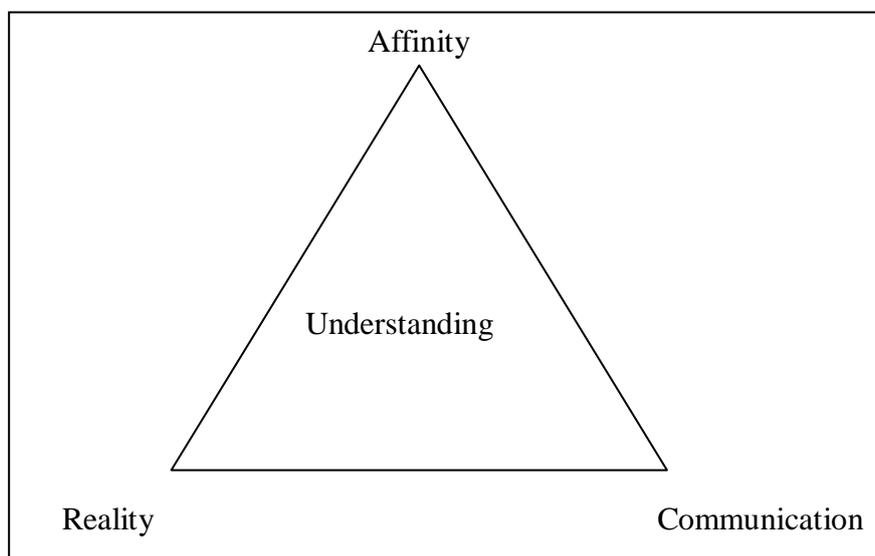


Figure 1: The ARCU Triangle

<sup>30</sup> Most rebirthing is facilitated through private sessions—one rebirther to one rebirthee. Group rebirths entail multiple people rebirthing concurrently.

<sup>31</sup> Attributed to L.Ron Hubbard.

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As Margaret adds the words she defines their meanings.

*Affinity is a mutual attraction to someone and a willingness to be close. Reality in relationship is the amount of agreement between two or more people. Communication is an exchange of ideas or thoughts between two or more people. Understanding: is the act of comprehension and knowledge and it is proportional to the degree of affinity, reality and communication. When any of these three elements are missing, a lack of understanding is the result and this is experienced as grief. The evidence of this has been seen and demonstrated 100% in the sadness that is experienced during any relationship problems, work issues, or death of a loved one.*

This model stimulates questions from the participants. Margaret uses an example to demonstrate the 'ARC break' as it is most commonly known within the training.

*The couple has a disagreement; this is a break in reality. They stop speaking to each other; this is a break in communication. They have then reduced affinity for each other and start to dislike each other more. As time goes on they feel less and less understood by their partner and therefore finish up with little understanding of each other. The couple will experience deep sadness and grief.*

This model will become a regular feature throughout the course as people explore their own grief and sadness.

The day continues during which basic information about rebirthing is disseminated to and discussed with the group. Information about the breathing technique, the procedure for a session, possible somatic and mental outcomes, and session completion is communicated. Throughout the session Margaret illustrates various points with her own personal experience of being a rebirther for more than twenty years. Underlying rebirthing practice is that as a rebirther, there is to be no evaluation of the rebirthee. Reflecting on the notion of the self as a spiritual being as outlined in Chapter One, evaluation is understood to undermine their own self-determination. As Margaret explains, 'evaluations may result in people being pushed beyond their limits, and also supposes that you're better at knowing what's good for them. In fact, their own being knows what is going to happen way before you do.'

Margaret writes in the Participant Manual (Unit One: 22):

Rebirthing is a simple and safe breathing technique that is designed to eliminate from the body and psyche negative and held emotions and thoughts.

### 3 The Beginning: Holding the Space

The breath in a body is used as an eliminator of toxins. Sometimes these toxins are not only physical but also emotional. Emotional toxins help in the body such as anger, fear, grief or guilt can have detrimental effects on the general health and happiness of a person.

Margaret explains how rebirthing explicitly operates on four levels. Firstly, at the physical level, all somatic experience from pain, pressure, sensation, temperature is informative; in particular, heat is understood to signify released energy whereas the sensation of cold indicates fear. Pain, within rebirthing, is also understood as an indicator of fear. A common refrain used by Margaret throughout the training is 'pain is resistance caused by fear'. Secondly, at the level of emotion, rebirthing is said to 'clear emotional congestion'. Mentally, the third level provides mental clarity for the rebirthee. At the fourth level, the spiritual level, 'anything goes'. Spiritual experiences within rebirths can include connecting to people who have died to transpersonal experiences that 'provide deep insights that go beyond the personal history of the individual to the ultimate nature of reality and the wider concerns of all human kind' (Minett 2004:18). Margaret adds, 'The breath is deletive both physically and emotionally. The reason we focus on peaceful rebirths is that we don't want to reinstall drama. Most people have enough drama in their lives without having it in their therapy as well.'<sup>32</sup> Margaret explains in more detail the conscious connected breathing pattern, including a physical demonstration. She reinforces to the participants that it is 'absolutely fundamental to the whole practice to get the breathing right. One of your roles is to ensure that the rebirthee maintains this conscious connected breathing for the full hour'. Margaret also emphasises that

*anything is possible during a rebirth from seemingly nothing to strong emotions and sensations to deep spiritual experiences. Your job is to just sit there in support. Sometimes one of the hardest things to do is just sit, not doing anything except hold the space.*

The participants have all experienced one-on-one sessions prior to the rebirthing training, ranging from multiple sessions for Jonathon, Lily and Paul, to only a few for Simon, Gaylene and Robyn. However, Robyn has experienced a group rebirth, as has Lily. As such, all the participants have experienced being rebirthed, this is the first step in learning how to rebirth others. Margaret writes in the Trainers Manual (Unit One: 27-28):

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<sup>32</sup> A reference to the more cathartic practices as promoted by the school of Holotropic Breathwork. (See page 6.)

### 3 *The Beginning: Holding the Space*

Who is able to become a rebirther? Anybody who sees that they are able to put the needs of themselves aside enough to help another would be suitable. Rebirthing is a modality that can assist in a life journey as long as the practitioner is able to set aside his/her own needs for the duration of a session. A rebirther's main duty to the client is to allow the space and time for a person to reach their own truth in an environment of pure love and compassion. A rebirther must be able to listen without evaluation, judgement or invalidation of the client. The motivation for a rebirther must only be one of support and coach on the client's own journey of awareness.

Feelings and emotions, conscious and subconscious, are critical terms within rebirthing as explored in the section on the rebirthing personhood in Chapter Two. As Minett (1994:92) elaborates:

The first breathing sessions are usually dominated by memories stored closest to the surface, in the subconscious. Although a person may feel submerged in emotions and memories, the entire scene occurs while one is awake and conscious of the process.

The client is considered to be unaware of this subconscious material and it is through rebirthing that this suppressed material is brought to the surface. 'The use of the rebirthing process...relieves the emotional and physical tension in the body and gives a new awareness to the client' (Participant Manual, Unit One: 22). It is by focussing on the emotional and somatic experience of the body during rebirthing that suppressed inner experience comes to light. As Morningstar<sup>33</sup> (1994:44) suggests, '[r]ebirthing opens the heart to emotional recovery. Some of the most powerful energy we experience as human in our bodies is emotional'. In rebirthing narratives, emotions are energy-in-motion—a construct that will be expanded upon in the next chapter. Emotions as energy are contained in the body, and the awareness of emotions as energy in the body is feelings. 'To have a feeling is to be immediately aware of energy...that is, to feel—whether fear, sadness, anger, excitement, happiness, joy—is to be aware of energy in motion' (Sky 1990:34).

On Sunday afternoon, a group rebirth is facilitated. In this instance, all the new participants simultaneously undergo rebirthing with the assistants, the trainer and me

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<sup>33</sup> Jim Morningstar: clinical psychologist and director of Transformations Incorporated, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Having worked in rebirthing amongst other personal growth approaches, Morningstar commenced facilitation the Transformations Breathworker Training Program in 1990. He is co-director of the International Breathwork Training Alliance.

### 3 The Beginning: Holding the Space

sitting with them. Margaret explains to the assistants, 'the participants don't have the confidence to be able to sit with each other as a rebirther. Next time we come together they will be more comfortable with the process'.



Plate 1: Rebirthing in practice

While the participants have a break, the assistants reorganise the training room, removing the chairs and replacing them with six mattresses. After the break the participants return, lie down on the mattresses and cover themselves with the blanket or doona that they had been instructed the previous evening to bring. Margaret and the assistants scatter themselves amongst the participants sitting or lounging on cushions. Boxes of tissues are also strategically placed near the participants' heads. Margaret dims the lights, starts the music that is 'quiet and repetitive' (Trainers Manual, Unit One: 29) and guides the participants through a short relaxation meditation and then into the conscious connected breathing cycle. The participants continue breathing with their eyes closed; the assistants making subtle corrections to the breathing pattern of the participants and occasionally engaging in quiet conversation. The hour comes to an end, followed by a debriefing session in which the participants relate their various experiences of the group rebirth. Paul admits to being 'quite anxious. I'm a very private person and this is more public. But I trust Margaret and the one-on-ones have been okay.' After Paul's admission, the remaining participants also admit to feeling anxious as well. Robyn

has had some realisations: 'I've made some decisions—to love myself, to respect myself, that my feelings are okay, and to be myself.'

Margaret addresses the group about the necessity for self-love.

*A big part of rebirthing is learning to love yourself, because when you love and accept yourself just as you are, you are then able to live the life you have been given. This means loving yourself as you love others in your life, otherwise you get into admiration or judgement. For many of us, during our development, self-love was a put-down. 'He loves himself,' 'she loves herself.' The idea of loving ourselves was castigated. All we want in life is to be loved and accepted, so the first place we start is with ourselves. What's more, if you can't love and accept yourself, it's really difficult to do it for anyone else.*

After further discussion, Margaret brings the session to a close with the selection of buddies for the following weeks. The final song is then sung, people hug and leave after a long and challenging weekend.

When the group reconvene a fortnight later for the mid-month meeting, much frivolity and laughter is evident. The Tibetan bells as the time-keeping device provided much of the amusement. Compared to the first evening of the introductory weekend, the participants all appear relaxed and express how pleased they are to be back in the training. It is easy to surmise that the work to build the familiarity with space has begun. The fear and anxiety of the unknown, the liminal space of the rebirthing training, has been somewhat alleviated.

## Conclusion

'[C]risis in individuals' personal lives...presents dangers to their security and sense of wellbeing, yet also offers fresh opportunities for their self-development and future happiness' (Giddens 1991:10). The reasons for undertaking rebirthing, and subsequently the rebirthing training, were revealed in the introductory interviews I conducted with the six new participants. A life crisis, acute or chronic, precipitated a strong desire for change and transformation at both a personal internal level and externally within their social spheres. Fear and anxiety were revealed to be the primary emotional states that the participants entered into the training on the first night, during which the participants were invited to introduce themselves and expose the source of their fear to the group. By

comparing the rebirthing training to a rite of passage, this fear and anxiety was contextualised.

However, the rebirthing training differs from traditional rites of passage that maintained a fearful state in the neophytes. I have discussed the specific spatial and temporal arrangements constructed by Margaret that, in conjunction with small rituals repeated throughout the weekend, provided a stable environment promoting safety for the participants. The intention, for Margaret, was that this 'space' is safe enough for the participants to risk feeling unsafe as they challenge themselves to be honest with themselves and their cohorts. Through the construction and content of the training, bonding, intimacy and trust amongst the participants was supported, as emotional awareness and expression are considered to be primary to the success of rebirthing. I have briefly summarised the first weekend concluding with a comparison of the emotional states of the rebirthing trainees from the start of the training to when they enter the mid-month session.

In this chapter, the highly personalised, intimate, emotional nature of the rebirthing training has been revealed. That the participants entered the training in a heightened state of fear and anxiety is evident, adding potency to their desire to seek and facilitate change in their lives. The initial interviews and the participants' revelations to the group on the first night indicated, despite their embodied fear and anxiety, a commitment to the process and a desire to override their discomforts to achieve the changes and outcomes they expressed. Establishing the training space as a 'safe' space on the first weekend enabled the participants to settle in, share their greatest fears, and get to know one another. In Chapter Four, their journeys will metaphorically start in the second training weekend: Conception and Birth—the very beginnings of life.

## 4

# Conception and Birth: rebirthing the body

## Introduction

The second weekend of the rebirthing training is titled Birth and Conception. In rebirthing circles the process of birth is considered to be the primary influence on a person's life. The work of Frederick Leboyer, as disclosed in the introductory chapter, has profoundly informed and influenced the discourse of birth within the rebirthing domain and, in *Birth Without Violence*, Leboyer (1978:19) writes:

Until birth, [an infant's] skin knew only the velvet caress of membrane. Then, suddenly, it is wrapped in harsh fabrics. Newborn babies arrive in our world as if on a carpet of thorns. They'll adapt to it. By withdrawing into themselves, by deadening their senses. But when they first land on these thorns, they howl. Naturally. And idiots that we are, we laugh.

Fernance (2003:3) encapsulates the rebirthing position on birth as she writes: '[t]he memory of being born, that is coming from liquid to air under such extreme pressures of intense sound, light and movement obviously plays a significant role in determining how you perceive the world, learn and create relationships.'

In this chapter, the participants' understandings of themselves, personhood and memory are challenged by their emotional and embodied experiences of conception and birth. The second training weekend is designed to 'reactivate the students subconsciously in areas of their lives that pertain to the circumstances surrounding their birth and conception' (Trainers Manual, Unit Two: 3). Through the voices of the participants, the subjective experiences of conception and birth will be explored, drawing on a very specific model of the body as articulated within the rebirthing fraternity: the body energy schema. Throughout the weekend, Margaret facilitates a range of activities including meditations (conception and birth), discussions, and videos. The final event is a rebirth to enable participants to explore their experience of their conception and birth and the subsequent impact on their belief systems and lives. An opportunity is provided for

participants to challenge their beliefs around memory, their body and their earliest experiences of this life journey.

The revelations of the participants during this weekend support rebirthing discourse where the self is defined as a spiritual essence that exists prior to conception. It is at conception that life in a particular incarnation begins. Thus, it is considered possible within rebirthing that memory can be retrieved at any stage of a person's evolution: from past lives, pre-conception, conception continuing through the pregnancy to birth and beyond. There is no limitation as this memory is perceived to be located within the spiritual, mental and emotional bodies as well as the physical body once conception has taken place. Therefore the newborn child is perceived as all-knowing of its own particular cosmological history. It is accepted within rebirthing discourse that the shock and trauma of being born interrupts this 'knowingness' and the suppression of the natural breathing pattern starts with the suppression of painful experience.

### **'Where did I come from?'**

On the Friday night, Margaret takes the participants through a conception meditation by Eve and Vince Betar<sup>34</sup>. Most participants have reservations about the conception meditation prior to it beginning. There is some discussion and scepticism about whether it was possible to visualise the moment of conception and Margaret invites the participants to put their 'beliefs to one side and just see what happens'.

The introduction to the meditation proposes:

Don't try to remember, just take what comes to you.  
Allow your imagination to flow.  
Accept what comes to your mind and let yourself go with it.  
Now imagine yourself as a disembodied spirit;  
A divine being of light and love, between lifetimes in the timeless, spaceless realm.  
You know your potential as an immortal being and you want to actualise it on the physical plane.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Practitioners of Rebirthing and other New Age therapies from the 1970s in Australia.

<sup>35</sup> From an undated cassette recording by Vince and Eve Betar titled *Being Here: Choice, Conception & Immortality*

#### *4 Conception and Birth: rebirthing the body*

The meditation invites the participants to reflect on their choice of parents: why they chose their parents, and why their parents chose them. They are then guided to visualise their own conception.

Some lie on the floor, others sit in chairs. Each one focuses on their meditation, eyes closed, with concentration evident on their faces. I quietly sit in a corner listening and observing the participants as they are guided through the meditation. Occasionally there is a flicker of emotion moving across their faces; the most noticeable physical response is from Robyn whose body twitches noticeably when the meditation guides them to the point of conception. Once the meditation is finished, the participants proceed to write furiously, all deep in thought and confined to their own immediate space. It is like each individual has created their own cocoon, their own private space in which to explore this intensely personal and often challenging experience. Margaret plays soft background music as they write. Occasionally, individuals pause, thinking, before starting their writing again.

The intensity of the moment, this activity, can be felt in the room. I am aware of my senses and emotions as I watch them write. To me the room feels like a warm nest, holding these people throughout this most intimate and private experience, full of tenderness and wonder. It's like a spell has been woven and the outside world ceases to exist. I reflect on the enormous trust these people have placed in Margaret and this nine-month process, and their willingness, not only to be frank and honest with each other, but also to put incredible faith in me to participate, observe and write about their experiences.

Margaret calls time on the writing and invites the participants to share their experiences. There is a mixed reaction to the meditation. Simon states: 'I missed the whole thing...my left brain was talking.' Robyn describes having 'felt a lot of it however I didn't get a lot of words. Then my brain took over. My parents were very young and I was conceived before they were married. I cannot logically believe they chose me'. Then Gaylene reports: 'I don't see how my mother chose me, they weren't thinking of having a family though my father had a nurturing side and he wanted a daughter to experience that. I did get that I have a lot to learn from them'. Lily recounts auditory stimuli at the moment of

#### *4 Conception and Birth: rebirthing the body*

conception; her mother saying 'yippee it's a girl' whereas her father's response was 'oh shit'. Jonathon recounts that he had to concentrate on keeping his brain out of his experience of the meditation. He experienced 'pain in the heart chakra<sup>36</sup>' and a 'quite shocking unpleasant explosion when the egg and sperm united. My mother was a smoker and the womb was not a clean environment to be. It was not a happy place to be due to the strained relationship between my parents'. For Paul, he felt fear at the point of conception, 'scared of the partnership I was being born into though I heard from my mother, 'You're finally here.' As my spirit entered the womb, I said to myself, 'Here we go.'

This meditation is the first opportunity for the group to collectively challenge their understandings of conception and rely on their somatic, sensory and emotional experience during the meditation. Mental activity occurs in varying degrees, resulting in disruption: completely for Simon and in varying degrees for Robyn and Jonathon. Most informants express surprise at their experiences, and amazement at the clarity of an event that they had previously expressed reticence to having any recall. Robyn, though unable to verbalise what she has experienced during the meditation, is able to articulate an embodied experience of 'energy moving in my body'. Lily has the added advantage of talking to her parents about her conception, and in a later discussion, reveals having her father's response validated by him. She reports that 'oh shit' were exactly the words that had passed through her father's mind. 'He told me that even though I was a planned pregnancy, he was still terrified at the prospect of becoming a parent and the responsibilities that went with it.' For her mother it was different. 'Mum said that throughout the pregnancy she was really hoping that I was a girl and was so happy when I was born.'

### **Memory: the shadows of the past**

Traditionally and most commonly, the course of new life entails a male and female engaging in sexual intercourse. Conception and then impregnation take place; the

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<sup>36</sup> In Sanskrit, chakra means wheel or vortex. Each of the six major chakra points in the spine and their corresponding centres in the front of the body are vortexes of energy that swirl out into the world.

#### 4 Conception and Birth: rebirthing the body

mother incubates this new life for approximately nine months before expelling the newborn from her body into the environment.

Most secular, Western folk models of child development imply a mute and uncomprehending newborn arriving for the first time in the world of humans from a restricted uterine life of minimal stimulation and no social interaction. (Gottlieb 2004:79)

Memory of this period of development is considered to be unavailable to the infant; memory being the province of older children and adults (Gottlieb 2005:105) as from a biological perspective, primitive memory systems preclude memory retention (Rovee-Collier 1999:80). Psychology labels this lack of memory of infancy or early childhood in most adults as infantile or childhood amnesia (Hayne 2004:33-34; Rovee-Collier 1999:80). However Wang (2003:66) questions as to '[w]hether these memories are lost, blocked, or not encoded...in the first place'. In *Our Babies, Ourselves*, Meredith Small describes a baby's cry as a strategy that has 'evolved to serve the infant's purposes: to assure protection, adequate feeding, and nurturing for an organism that cannot care for itself' (1998:156). In this kind of understanding, babies' agency is limited by its limited psycho/physiology. Rebirthing practice relies on specific models of memory that arise from the junction of the self as a spiritual being and the body energy schema.

Rebirthing operates on the premise that memory, pleasant and unpleasant, is stored within a person's energetic body. From a rebirthing perspective, trauma from the past impacts on present day life through decisions made as a result of that trauma and as Young (1996:89) proposes, 'traumatic memory, consisting of images, emotions, sensations, and words [is] located in psychological space'. Three types of memory beyond everyday recall are embedded within the rebirthing training. The first is ancestral memory that is proposed to be carried by the DNA passed from ancestors through the parents into the child. Secondly, past life memories are carried into this lifetime within the spiritual being that reincarnates. The third form of memory that plays the most significant role in rebirthing is cellular memory—implicit and explicit within rebirthing discourse in conjunction with the alternative view of the energetic body.

As explained to me by Margaret, cellular memory is memory of the current lifetime that is embedded in the neurological system; a system that is connected to each and every cell

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in the body. Cellular memory is described as 'suppressed energy patterns' by Sisson<sup>37</sup> (1990:7); alternatively Sky<sup>38</sup> (1990:43) describes this suppressed pain as 'a contracted energy scar—an "energy becoming mass" wound in our emotional body'. Cellular memory may be episodically retrieved through conscious connected breathing, much of which is understood to reside outside of conscious memory. This is considered to be particularly evident in traumatic experiences that have resulted in negative unconscious beliefs about the self, beliefs that belie the true nature of the self—the 'divine being'. This is the most common source of memory that is accessed through rebirthing—bringing into conscious awareness negative experiences and subsequent negative beliefs so that they can be viewed, assessed and revised. It is the principal goal of rebirthing to activate and release, in particular, negative memory that is held in the body. Rebirthing facilitates, according to Minett Minett (1994:30), the 'release [of] inner, stored energy', and in a later text, 'dissolves psycho-physiological blocks' (Minett 2004:100). During rebirthing, any of the three memory sources may be accessed: ancestral, past life or cellular memory. Furthermore, due to the energetic construction of the universe, it is deemed possible to tap into other sources of information or experience. Under these circumstances, the self is viewed as limitless and amenable to change.

Rebirthing is based on an alternative set of assumptions as discussed in Chapter Two: a spiritual self that precedes the body and, as evident from the meditation, conception. Through the experiences of the participants, a very different picture of these early life experiences emerge—one that reflects a baby with a greater degree of agency than suggested by Small. Gottlieb proposes that with a 'model that posits a passive baby-as-object rather than an active baby-as-subject, it is hard to imagine how infants might set their own agendas' (2004:49). Through the conception meditation, the participants have been exposed to the possibility of their role in choosing *this* lifetime and *their* particular family. In this way, the rebirthing training proposes an agency that exists prior to conception.

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<sup>37</sup> Living in New Zealand, Colin Sisson as an internationally recognised inspirational writer, speaker, and seminar leader on conscious living. He authored *Rebirthing Made Easy* in 1985.

<sup>38</sup> A student of Leonard Orr, Michael Sky has published and facilitated workshops on a range of techniques including 'circular breathing,' fire walking, body work and ritual.

The experience of this conception meditation seems to be a major step in the bonding of this group. It is as if the act of sharing with their cohort further validates their experiences; that despite prior scepticism, there are no negative responses to their accounts of the meditation. Their experiences require an expanded perception of their bodies beyond the limits of the 'cultural concepts of *mind* and *body*' (Martin 2000:570, original italics).

### **Alternative bodies**

Throughout the process of the rebirthing training, embedded in the dialogue and through the experiences of the participants, is a particular notion of the body beyond that of the corporeal body. This particular construction of the body—body-as-energy—informs and influences the discourse of many alternative practices such as yoga, reiki, and in particular, rebirthing. The energetic body of rebirthing stands in stark contrast to the biomedical body; one which is discrete, bounded and is 'subject to medical control and technology' (Csordas 1999a:178).

Through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when '[m]edicine made its appearance as a clinical science' (Foucault 1975:xv), the body became viewed as a machine (ibid.:139; Lock & Scheper Hughes 1996:47; Martin 1994:28). Pathogenic medicine, which evolved in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, posited the body as a closed system—the body as a impenetrable fortress requiring vigilance against attacks from the dangerous outside (Martin 1994:25-26). 'After the 1940s and 1950s, attention to the defences *within* the body increased exponentially' (ibid.:32, italics in original), and coupled with a rapid growth in technology, the body became increasingly transparent. As Barcan (2011:62) suggests, 'modern technology enables biomedicine to penetrate the body through increasingly sophisticated imaging giving us 'access to new ways of seeing, mapping, imagining, and 'knowing' our bodily interiors'. Furthermore, the increasing specialisation by biomedicine has resulted in specialist practitioners focussing solely on certain systems of the body, 'such as the heart, the lungs, [or] the immunological system' (Singer & Baer 2007:141). This practice of modern medicine maintains the mind-body distinction 'as illness resides in either the body or the mind' (Scheper Hughes & Lock 1987:21), which is evident in the clear

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delineation between psychiatry and other practices of biomedicine. In addition, '[s]ocial relations are seen as partitioned, segmented, and situational—generally as discontinuous with health or sickness' (Lock & Scheper Hughes 1996:58). As a result, the social and cultural positioning of the body has been generally ignored within the process of diagnosis within biomedicine.

The body, within the modern biomedical framework, is mechanised with attention on repair rather than prevention. The separation of the body from the mind (Scheper Hughes & Lock 1987:6) is evident in medical encounters where, as Lyon and Barbalet (1994:52) propose, 'the body [is] an object external to the enquiries which yield knowledge of it'. The body is reductive, broken down into its components for specialists to attend to their chosen field of expertise—their particular body system. In summary, '[t]he medical body is passive...the body is readily subordinated to the authority of medical practice...the medical body is a partial body' (ibid.:52-53) and as Lock and Scheper-Hughes (1996:45) propose, 'medical anthropology fails to consider the way in which the human body itself is culturally constructed'. Lock (1993:136), however, points out that 'subjectivity and its relation to biology and society cannot be ignored,' and whilst biomedicine focuses on the biology, it is the subjective experience and the impact of social relations in which rebirthing is most interested. However, most significantly, the construction of the body within rebirthing as an energetic body stands in contrast to the view of the biological body in biomedicine and as such, has wider implications for the experience of the body which I shall address after recounting the model of the body as understood in rebirthing. To do so, I shall draw anecdotally on the training and personal recollections.

Understanding the body in rebirthing necessitates a particular conceptualisation of energy. In the previous chapter, I introduced the concept of emotion as 'energy in motion'. This is predicated on the notion of the body as energy: a universal energy that is spiritual in nature. The universe is seen to be constructed of energy, thus the body is understood to be a solidified energy mass. Surrounding the corporeal body are layers or sheaths of energy. During the training Margaret draws a diagram of this alternative body/energy construct, drawing on Eastern notions of energy and reincarnation.

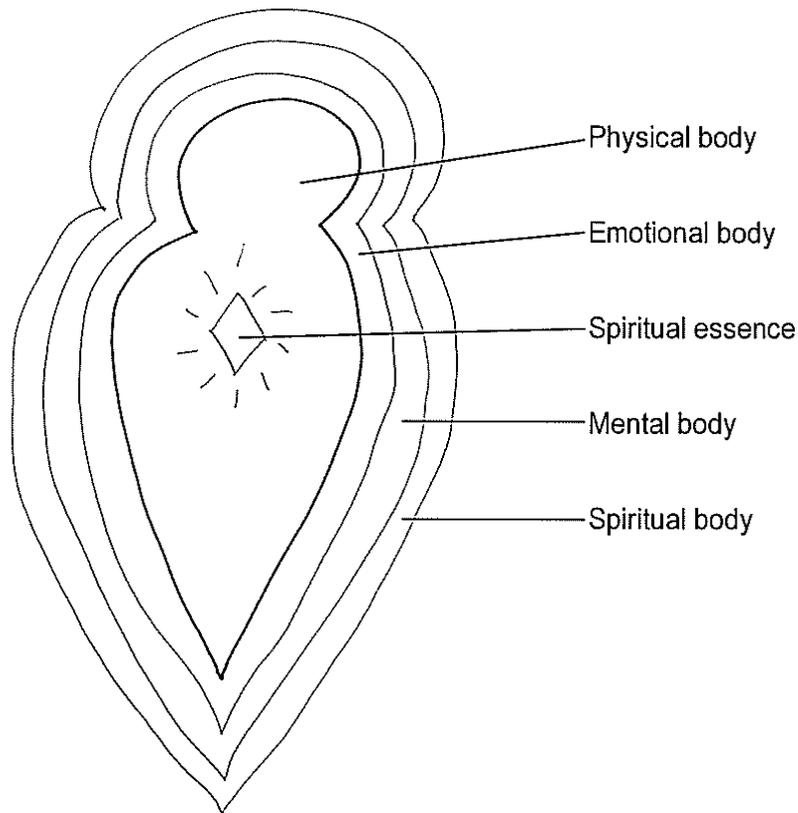


Figure 2: The energy body schema

Recalling the self as a spiritual being from the introductory chapter, a spiritual essence which is variably and interchangeably labelled the true self, the higher self, the God/Goddess within, the 'spark of Divinity' (Sisson 1990:45), is seen as residing in the heart (Fig. 2). Within rebirthing, the heart is also considered the centre of emotion. Layers of energy envelop the physical body, the first being the emotional body field, then the mental and finally the spiritual, reflecting the four aspects of personhood that rebirthing addresses. These energetic bodies are described as vibrational; the corporeal body vibrating at the lowest frequency, with the frequency increasing moving outward through the energetic fields. Each energy field interpenetrates one another, superimposed and extending beyond the corporeal body, which is the sole body with a firm demarcation. The other three energy fields may be likened to a corona, the shift from one energy body to the next similar to the continuum of the coloured light spectrum.

The concept of body-as-energy will emerge as a significant factor in understanding the personal journeys of the participants and will unfold through the thesis. Explicit within the

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rebirthing discourse is the precept that changes at any one level of these energy bodies impacts on the other bodies—that healing of any of these energy bodies brings about healing in the others. It is in this way that rebirthing personhood can be understood to be porous. As Smith, K (2012:11) proposes, ‘the human subject is a thoroughly permeated being—one that is permeated by social others; by socially ascribed meanings, roles, norms and mores—while also remaining open to ‘nature’ the ‘world’ and the mysteries of existence’.

The energy body schema described by Margaret matches the ‘subtle body model’ proposed by Johnston and Barcan (2006:29) in which the subtle body is described as being comprised of ‘interpenetrating and extensive sheaths of matter-consciousness that extend beyond the physical flesh boundary’ with the physical body considered ‘as one body – one sheath of matter-consciousness’. Within this model, similar to that presented by Margaret, matter and consciousness are considered to be of the same ‘material’—energy. The outcome from this model is that ‘the mind-matter dichotomy is transformed...It is the density or ‘vibration’ of the matter-consciousness that distinguishes the different sheaths of the subtle body’ (ibid.:30). Johnston & Barcan propose that in alternative healing modalities, like rebirthing, the ‘dominant belief is that changes in this energy (in this subtle body) at any level – mentally, physically, emotionally, spiritually – will bring about changes to all other aspects of the individual’ (ibid.:30).

This energy body schema alters the nature of the space between persons and/or objects—a ‘bio-energetic field,’ reflecting Lock’s (1993:138) notion of ‘[f]luid boundaries, between individuals and society and between individuals and nature,’ a body which is ‘intercommunicative and active’ (Lyon & Barbalet 1994:56). This body ‘is understood not merely as subject to external agency, but as simultaneously an agent in its own world construction’ (ibid.:48). As such, within rebirthing, this body is imbued with agency, seen as a primary source of information, both about the self and one’s relationships to, and in, the wider environment. And through its construction, that of energy, the body is no longer conceived in an ‘individual, biological bounded form, but extended [not only] to include its social relations’ (ibid.:55), but also to include and interact with the energetic plasma across time and space.

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Accepted contemporary notions of body/space in which the individual is seen as a corporeally bounded entity are altered within this alternative model of body/energy/awareness. The subjective experience is also impacted as the individual's perception of self shifts from the dense boundedness of the biological body to the unbounded agency of the energetic body. As Johnston and Barcan (2006:29) posit:

[t]his concept of subjectivity is significant, because it brings with it not only a change in the way in which one understands one's physical constitution – refiguring anatomy as energy – but also changes to how an individual is perceived within a broader worldview and to the ethics of relations between individuals in social/political interaction.

This extended energetic field, commonly referred to as the 'aura' in alternative and New Age practices, can also be seen as a "bio-energetic field"...something that can literally be felt, something actualized in a particular body but exchangeable between and beyond them' (Paterson 2007:166).

Critical to this body energy schema is the notion of reincarnation, an ideology which is well known in the East and also appears in Africa and native North America (Gottlieb 2004:79). Reincarnation is a core belief underlying rebirthing practice as it is through the reincarnated spiritual essence that past lives may be retrieved during sessions of conscious connected breathing. It is the reincarnated soul that enters the newly conceived life, bringing with its spiritual essence the knowledge and experiences of past lives as proposed in the conception meditation in the previous section.

Cellular memory is implicit and explicit within the rebirthing lexicon alongside the alternative view of the body. As explained to me by Margaret, cellular memory retains everything that has taken place in the current lifetime. It is the principle goal of rebirthing to activate and release, in particular, negative memory that is held in the body. Within rebirthing texts, cellular memory is described as 'suppressed energy patterns' by Sisson (1990:7). Sky describes this cellular memory of suppressed pain as 'a contracted energy scar—an "energy becoming mass" wound in our emotional body' (1990:43). Rebirthing facilitates the 'release [of] inner, stored energy' (Minett 1994:30), and in a later text, 'dissolves psycho-physiological blocks' (Minett 2004:100). The concept of cellular memory is embodied and articulated by the participants during the next day.

### **Birth realisations: 'I hadn't realised just how small and fragile I was'**

Following the experience and insights from the conception meditation on the Friday night, Saturday is experienced intensely by the participants. They arrive on Saturday morning in various emotional and physical states. After the usual morning rituals—singing a song, sharing any insights from the night before—Margaret leads the participants through the visualisation meditation on the experience of one's birth inviting them to imagine and explore their own births. Everyone is then given an opportunity to talk about what happened for them during that meditation.

It is Gaylene's turn to share. She is sitting on the floor passively waiting. It is difficult to know what is going on in Gaylene's mind; she shows little emotion in her face or body. That all changes once she starts talking; her body begins to move and her face lights up. It is fascinating to hear what she has experienced. 'I am so surprised; I didn't expect to experience what I experienced in that meditation. I got a very strong sense of being whizzed up into the air to be shown to my mum.' As she speaks, Gaylene demonstrates the movement with her arms.

*It was a sensation in my body of going up and that's exactly the same feeling I get when I go up too high somewhere. There's this whooshing-up feeling and then just this total overwhelm. And I didn't know where it came from until now. And that's how I describe most of my life up until now. I've just been overwhelmed by so much. In that meditation I was whooshed up and held up and the lights were too bright and my arms and legs weren't being supported—it was like that startle reflex that babies have. The noise, the cold, just everything was happening all at once. As that little baby, I just felt overwhelmed; the fear of being taken up so high so quickly not realising there was going to be anything stopping me.*

Later I ask her about the meditation and any thoughts, reactions and realisations that she had about that experience. Gaylene explains.

*It was about identifying that exact same body feeling when I go up high. It more than just blew me away. Even the whoosh which goes from my stomach up to my heart when I go in high places was exactly the same body sensation; a cellular memory. It was just so strong. It really helped me to understand where a lot of my fear of heights—not the actual fear of heights but my body reaction to the fear of heights.*

The act of being swept into the air by the doctor created a physical sensation in Gaylene's body; a physical sensation that has been recreated episodically in response to

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heights. As a result of this birth re-experience, Gaylene reflects on her embodiment of fear which is evident not only physically, but emotionally and mentally. Gaylene draws on the physical body as it is 'whooshed into the air'. Emotionally Gaylene describes how she 'just felt overwhelmed', and recalls the 'fear of being taken up so high so quickly'. This is then followed by a mental response: 'It really helped me to understand where a lot of my fear of heights—not the actual fear of heights but my body reaction to the fear of heights'. From her perspective, this visualisation meditation has enabled Gaylene to connect the somatic body experience of being 'whooshed up' after her birth to the emotion of fear and feeling overwhelmed throughout her life. Her mentioning of cellular memory in her recollection indicates that Gaylene has already integrated that particular concept into her personal story.

Whilst Gaylene's account of her experience of this meditation highlights her physical limitations as a baby being delivered through the actions of the attending doctor, her recollection also reveals an alternative experience, one that does not rely on cognition but on the sensorial and emotional experience of being in a body. Through this account, though preverbal, Gaylene as an adult is able to articulate what she experienced as an extremely stressful event.

Jonathon describes his birth, being three months premature.

*I was put into a humidicrib and I wasn't touched by my parents in that time. It was a difficult labour for my mother. She took no drugs as she didn't want to compromise me as a baby. Interesting since she smoked all the way through the pregnancy. It was a natural birth. I have worked out through previous rebirths that my life issue is about disapproval. I realised through the meditation that I thought by coming early I would avoid disapproval. They would be so pleased to see me. What actually happened by coming early, I created disapproval, which was reflected in my three-month hospitalisation and no touch.*

Jonathon's knowledge of his birth<sup>39</sup> has been partially constructed from what he has been told, primarily by his mother. The history of the labour, his time in the humidicrib, his mother visiting without touching, is a story, a collection of anecdotes from his family, constructed from their memories. However, rebirths in the past have enabled Jonathon

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<sup>39</sup> When a new client commences their first rebirthing session, they are asked for details about their birth history and/or any stories told to them about their birth. They may be encouraged to ask, within their families, for further information, primarily from their mothers.

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to access his own story of his birth and its associated outcomes, which is then drawn upon during the meditation. In this meditation, Jonathon firstly realises that he decided to come early to please his parents; however he also realises that his coming early to avoid disapproval actually did the opposite. Jonathon then spent some time reflecting on how this insight has influenced the way he has previously continuously searched for approval throughout his life.

Emerging from the experiences from both the conception and birth meditations is a notion of agency that challenges the expectations of the participants. This agency is firstly exercised by the soul or spirit ready to incarnate, choosing the cultural environment and parents that will facilitate their new journey. Secondly, this agency can be exercised within the womb as in the case of Jonathon when he recounts choosing to be born early. However, from Jonathon's perspective, this choice has impeded agency throughout his life through his continued seeking of approval. Gaylene's account of her birth experience also demonstrates the limits of agency after birth. At birth, Gaylene is subject to the actions of those in the delivery room, the bright lights, being 'whooshed up' and feeling unsupported.

Through the birth meditation, Gaylene has recounted her experience of begin born. Jonathon has related his foetal decision to come early and his subsequent experiences of being pre-term. These accounts, from a rebirthing perspective, demonstrate cellular memory and its recall in action with the embodied experience being reactivated and re-experienced, evident in the narratives, emotional expression, and bodily modes as displayed by Gaylene and Jonathon.

Sky (1990:48-49) summarises the rebirthing perspective when he states that:

as infants we are obviously preverbal and physically undeveloped, we are nonetheless beings of great mental and emotional faculties [and reflects,] if anything, the newborn is hyperconscious—she has greater conscious awareness of the world in the first few hours of life than she shall likely have at any later time.

However, it is viewed within rebirthing that the newborn gradually screens out the sensory input to avoid sensory overload. The inhibition of breathing and contraction

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starts at this point in reaction to the painful experience of being born (Leonard & Laut 1983; Morningstar 1994; Orr & Ray 1977:74; Sisson 1990; Sky 1990:49).

After the Saturday lunch, we all make ourselves comfortable in Margaret's lounge to watch a series of birth DVDs. Robyn is comfortably settled on the end, with her legs extended along the ottoman. Simon is in the bean bag on the floor. The other participants are all on the lounge with the assistants scattered amongst them, Margaret and myself seated on dining chairs behind them.

Watching the birth videos, I notice that Jonathon is dabbing tears from his eyes. He later reveals that

*Seeing that little baby in the humidicrib, I hadn't realised just how small and fragile I was. It makes me feel so sad thinking about my mother coming in visiting, seeing me like that, and not being able to touch me...I'm feeling a lot of love for my mother, I need a hug.*

Lily offers her services and they quietly sit with their arms around one another. Jonathon takes a visual prompt from a video to bring into his awareness the reality of his first three months of life and is able to further refine his personal understanding and knowledge of this beginning which Jonathon reveals in a later interview.

*Saturday night I got home and had a huge burst of tears. I felt so clear and enormous when I walked out of Margaret's house with that awareness about moving into the future and self-esteem and issues like that. The first rebirths I had years ago, I ended up with pneumonia after each one; it scared the shit out of me. I now can see I was clearing all that lung stuff I had as a newborn baby.*

Jonathon readily intermingles knowledge from his family and previous rebirths, images, emotions and physical sensation to create his personal understanding of his birth and the subsequent impact on his life, reflecting the interplay of the interpenetrating layers of energy, 'matter-consciousness' (Johnston & Barcan 2006:29).

After the birthing videos, the participants have an opportunity to express to the group their insights from the activities around birth and conception. Paul has 'an epiphany' after the birth meditation. 'I was an inconvenience. I interrupted a damn fine cricket match for my father. He didn't want to leave the match to take my mother to hospital.' After the

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birth videos, Paul is tearful. 'I had my first panic attack when I was born.' From the birth knowledge based on what he has learnt from his family and his experience during the birth meditation, Paul is able to integrate his realisation that he was an inconvenience and that his life-long panic attacks started at that time.

Sam, one of the assistants, also has personal revelations.

*I've been having a frustrating day. In bed last night, my head was caning. I realised today that my head hurt during birth because I was a forceps delivery. I wanted to get out but my mother wasn't helping because she had an epidural. I realised yesterday that I had a belief that women hold me up.*

Sam is describing an embodied memory of the pain he experienced at birth. In rebirthing terms this encounter is an example of cellular memory: a pain in the head that he attributes to his birth experience, the details of which he learnt from his mother.

Robyn has no insights from the birth meditation into her own birth. She reveals that it was natural and full-term, information gleaned from her mother. However, the birth videos activate Robyn's recollections of giving birth. She describes

*a smorgasbord of emotions: anxiety, happiness, regret. Watching the videos brought up the twins' birth. I didn't want twins, I hated it. I didn't want to have children as soon as I did when I got married, but I fell pregnant easily. Once the children were born the bonding was good. In those days, the men didn't come in and I had to do it on my own.*

Robyn talks about the birth of her twins. 'All these people came in to watch a natural birth of twins. Nobody asked my permission and I felt abused. They wouldn't be able to do that today due to privacy laws.' Robyn has an emotional reaction to the birth weekend based on her experiences of birthing her own children. She tells me she left the weekend on a high, feeling a sense of self-love, of 'being wanted more than ever before'.

Similar to Robyn, Lily has a shift in focus. She shares with the group.

*My own birth didn't come up in the sense of I didn't have any trauma or any problems such as cords tied or forceps or anything and I was welcomed into the world; quite loved so there was no problems there. My birth was easy. The only thing I really got from the meditation was that I felt rushed. So this weekend hasn't been about my personal birth but more that I've always been frightened of childbirth from stories I've heard and stuff on the TV and in films. I've never actually seen a woman give birth let alone in the circumstances shown on the*

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*video such as the home births and the water births which seem to be just so easy and normal and natural and the women were just amazing and it made me realise that there's the other side. You hear all the nasty stories but you don't hear all the amazing simple easy births that happen in the world. It's all about the drama. I know it will hurt, but I know I could do it now. So it was more about my fear of me giving birth to a child.*

For Lily, the videos provided a source of information about the birthing process that impacted on and changed her understanding and expectations. The fear that she had previously experienced in imagining and experiencing this event for herself, drawing on stories and media presentations of dramatic, traumatic birth, had coloured her expectations for herself. Through the visual imagery of women having births that were 'easy and normal and natural' reduced the fear Lily was feeling towards childbirth, and to change her intellectual understanding of the process.

The flexibility of the rebirthing process and the training is reflected in the experiences of Robyn and Lily through the birth meditation and subsequently the birth videos. Whilst the purpose of the birth meditation is to guide the participants through experiencing their own birth, this was not the outcome for Robyn and Lily. Both women, however, reacted to the birth videos reflecting issues of agency. According to Robyn, her agency was compromised when she delivered her twins; the medical system utilising her as a teaching tool without her permission. In contrast, Lily described a shift in her potential agency as she witnesses childbirth videos where women are shown to be in control of their own birthing process. The discourse of rebirthing would validate each participant's individualised and personalised experience. Drawing on notions of the individual being comprised of a spiritual essence inhabiting a body that incorporates other energy bodies, the experiences of each participant, whether emotional, somatic, intellectual or spiritual, are seen as valid. Each person's experience is seen to be guided by their own spirit. How this plays out at one's birth is a key factor in the rebirthing process.

'We learn to breathe at birth...Under the very best of circumstances, birth is an intensely traumatic event...We are forced into a long, arduous, and terrifying labour—an absolute struggle for survival' (Sky 1990:47). It is at this time, according to rebirthing, that the inhibition of breath commences and the precognitive 'decisions' are made about being in the world. Orr and Ray (1977:73) write, 'At the moment of birth, you form impressions about the world which you have carried all your life; these impressions control you from a

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subconscious level'. They then lists some examples of these impressions such as: 'life is a struggle'; 'people hurt me'; and 'I am not wanted'. The spiritual aspect of embodiment at birth is highlighted by Sky (1990:47-48) who proposes that '[o]ur bodies undergo extraordinary pain' during the labour and birthing process and '[f]or our psyches, there is ...extraordinary pain: we are being violently separated from all we have known, cut off from the source'. Once again the idea of the self as a spiritual being is invoked. Drawing on those initial New Age precepts, the person as a spiritual being, and 'thought is creative', it is understood within rebirthing that these initial experiences leading to key decisions that then influence the outlook of that person for the rest of their lives. However it is considered possible to change these key decisions through modalities such as rebirthing.

With the rebirthing concept of the multi-layered energetic body, where mind and matter are one, this notion of trauma experienced at birth has an impact on all the energy levels—physical, emotional, mental and spiritual—as is articulated by the participants. As Johnston and Barcan (2006:31) state:

the subtle body posits the individual as radically open, extensive, interconnected, inherently intersubjective and processural, [therefore] physical-mental-emotional (and spiritual) aspects of the self are understood as inherently interrelated and co-constitutive.

Through a close analysis of a rebirth of Gaylene's on the weekend, I shall explore the interrelation of the somatic, sensory, emotional and cognitive as experienced by Gaylene. In this way, I shall demonstrate the intersubjective and processural nature of the body as posed by Johnston and Barcan.

On the Sunday, Gaylene has an opportunity to have a rebirthing session. I watch from a distance as Paul sits with Gaylene as her support person. Within a few minutes of commencing the conscious connected breathing, she is sobbing. During the debrief Gaylene explains:

*I think the crying was the sense of loss, what I'd missed out on in my life because of being controlled by fear. For as long as I can remember I've been frightened of so many things. And even as a child I was very fearful. I was always frightened of losing my mum. I was frightened of heights and I was terrified of dogs. Career choices were based on fear.*

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*Friendships were based on fear. I was fearful of all the activities that I chose to do or were forced to do. My parents with the best of intentions used to make me go and do things and a lot of those I couldn't do because the fear just held me back. So in the rebirth I very quickly got into the fear and where the fear had come from. The fear was in my body and had come from that moment when I was whooshed up after being born.*

Gaylene is describing the fear that has been present throughout her life, as an emotion that lodged in her body at birth.

*When I got to the top and was being held up, that was when fear actually lodged in my head. I couldn't tell whether the fear was in what I felt; or what my mum felt; or what the doctor was feeling; or somewhere in the room.*

Although Gaylene describes the fear lodging in her head, it is evident from her account that she is unable to identify the primary source of that fear. At this point, Gaylene proposes that the fear she embodied as that newborn infant, may have originated from outside herself—a manifestation of the 'radically open, extensive, interconnected' (Johnston & Barcan 2006:31) energy body schema of rebirthing. If an emotion can become embedded, it is equally possible to remove it.

*I had an image of the fear looking like a troll, a little grumpy black troll. I told it to get lost and go on his way. Towards the end I felt like I sort of came into my body. It was like my body and I had been separate entities—like myself and my spirit—and I felt like I sort of came home. I was kind of next to myself but not aligned within me.*

Gaylene enacts two forms of disembodiment. The first form takes place through a visualisation in which Gaylene converts the fear into an avatar—'a little grumpy black troll,' an entity that has physical, visual, auditory and emotional components. Gaylene then removes the manifestation of her fear from her body. This mode of disembodiment, the metaphorical removal of emotion from her body, may be seen as a positive and therapeutic outcome for Gaylene. In the second form, Gaylene describes the merging of a disembodied self with her corporeal body—a re-embodiment of self with body—also a positive outcome for Gaylene. She uses her hands to indicate where her separated self was located in relation to her body whilst explaining:

*I could feel myself filling up with liquid or spirit or something. It was like a balloon starting off small and then expanding into my skin from the inside. It wasn't like the two of us merged or anything. It was more of a filling feeling. And it went from my middle out and then down to my toes and up.*

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Despite the disembodied self described by Gaylene as being situated outside her corporeal self, the merging takes form from within; the merging self being described as a filling feeling inside her physical body. These forms of disembodiment stand in contrast to the 'absent body' of Leder (1990); disembodiment through trauma such as experienced by labouring women through childbirth (Akrich 2004); disembodied person in the online world (Kang 2007); or the experience of disembodied patients as medical imaging is privileged over the bodily experience (Blaxter 2009). In this particular context, the disembodiment of emotion, as described by Gaylene, is positive.

Gaylene's account of this rebirth challenges the concept of the body predicated upon the long-standing and heavily contested Western construct of the body as a bounded corporeal entity. Furthermore, she is articulating very particular notions of how her 'self' has been constructed drawing on the energy body schema. Whilst the emotion of fear is felt somatically within her body, Gaylene also describes it as a physical/energetic entity which she is able to eliminate from her body using mental imagery. Describing herself as 'filling up with liquid or spirit or something' suggests a representation of her spiritual dimension. In this account of Gaylene's rebirth, she depicts and recounts how her physical, emotional, mental and spiritual aspects interact and overlap, thus demonstrating how 'aspects of the self are understood as inherently interrelated and co-constitutive' (Johnston & Barcan 2006:31) as depicted by the energy body schema.

In a later interview I ask her about her experience during that rebirth.

*I had hoped it would be about the fear I had experienced throughout my life. I had always thought the fear was there to keep me safe, to stop me doing things that I might get hurt by. But in that rebirth, it was really interesting that fear was there for its own purpose—like a parasite. It wasn't there for my benefit at all. Whilst other rebirths have had more visuals, in this rebirth the only visual I had was the troll. I told it to go mopping and muttering down the road and to not look back; just keep going. In this rebirth it was definitely a more physical sense this time than a visual.*

I ask Gaylene how she felt after the rebirth.

*At the end of the rebirth I felt amazing. (Gaylene laughs). Just with the whole new understanding of where it all came from and now knowing I can deal with it. It's such a relief knowing that it's not a dysfunctional part of me and that I took ownership for it becoming part of my life. Then I can also take responsibility for sending it on its way. I am really just so*

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*relieved. It's like literally a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I'm still really frightened of heights but now I try things that I wouldn't have tried before. But I know that it's just that cellular memory that I have to deal with now. And I don't have that sense of overwhelm about everything anymore which is very freeing. I know that I just have to stop the cellular memory, calm myself down, and just deal with anything that makes me feel fearful. So now I'm dealing with my fear and I'm actually progressing. I've actually woken up an unconsciousness from within me. After the merging of my bodies I now feel a lot more balanced.*

Gaylene is articulating a new sense of self—one that is conscious with a resultant increased degree of agency. Understanding its source and taking 'ownership' of her fear has empowered Gaylene with a greater ability to control her reactions when confronting situations that stimulate her fear response. The subjective nature of Gaylene's experiences and her interpretation is all too evident and reflects the 'blurring of distinctions between mind-body-spirit, and the understanding that they have reciprocal effects upon one another' (Johnston & Barcan 2006:33). The embodied memory that Gaylene describes as cellular memory, once again is revealed in her rebirth during the mid-month evening two weeks later. She recounts her experience to me during an interview.

*I've made connections with things that I didn't realise were still affecting me. One example was a pain that I've had in the left hand side of my neck, which is there most of the time. And when I get a headache it gets really quite intense; Panadol doesn't affect it. In the rebirth I found out it was connected to a car accident I had about ten years ago. That car accident happened in the morning on the way to work and I said to myself 'I just have to try and ignore that pain, get on with the day, and deal with it later when I've got time'. And then in the rebirth session I made the connection that I didn't meet my needs at that time and that pain had stayed there. Since then pain hasn't come back, and that's about two weeks ago. So to me that was just amazing: what we carry in our body and don't know why we're carrying it until we actually make that connection.*

Gaylene is articulating yet another level of agency within her own life—a meeting of her own needs. From a rebirthing perspective, the somatic experience of Gaylene's car accident has remained embedded in her cellular memory until this rebirth. Gaylene has 'woken up [another] unconsciousness from within' which, with awareness of its source, results in her long-standing neck pain disappearing. I ask Gaylene to describe her experiences during rebirths.

*I do the breathing and sometimes I don't feel like it's going anywhere. Not all rebirths for me have been connecting with negative things. I've had a couple of rebirths where I've just being able to relax and go with the more positive energy of that particular rebirth. I find them very healing in that I make a connection very early in the rebirth so then I can spend the rest of the*

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*time giving my body time to heal. I actually feel like it's healing inside—that there's this healing energy going through because I've been able to let something go. Basically the energy feels like just really warm and encompassing. And when I'm in that state, the light is mainly white: not glowing white but very clear pure white. When I'm rebirthing and going through something negative, often it's very dark until I've worked through whatever it is.*

I ask Gaylene, 'Where is this light?' Gaylene replies: 'All the way through on the inside of my body. It doesn't go on the outside. It's like I'm just filled with this milky white, light, it's been amazing.' Whilst in her first rebirth, Gaylene describes extending beyond her physical body. 'My body and I had been separate entities...I was kind of next to myself but not aligned within me'. During this interview Gaylene reveals that sensation is generally reduced to energy and light or dark contained within her corporeal boundaries. Furthermore, Gaylene reflects rebirthing discourse which posits memory to be embodied as cellular memory and retrievable during rebirthing.

After studying memory for more than three decades, cognitive psychologist Elizabeth Loftus (2003:872) concludes that:

People's memories are not only the sum of all that they have done, but there is more to them: The memories are also the sum of what they have thought, what they have been told, what they believe. Who we are may be shaped by our memories, but our memories are shaped by who we are and what we have been led to believe.

However this definition of memory is not sufficient to account for the experiences as described by Gaylene. This may be achieved by drawing on two forms of memory as proposed by Young (1996:98). First, '[m]ental memory which resides in the brain's cortex, is notoriously revisable and permits time to move in two directions'. This is the memory outlined by Loftus as above. The second form of memory is that of 'bodily memory, locked into the limbic and sympathetic systems...revisable only through evolutionary mechanisms' (Young 1996:98). This second form of memory best applies to the experiences of Gaylene who describes her memory as 'cellular memory'. These memories are reputedly placed there by traumatic episodes: in the first instance her being held aloft at birth; and the second instance a car accident. It is through meditation and rebirthing that Gaylene is able to transform the emotional, physical and mental impressions of these memories and develop a sense of spiritual completeness.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, the impact of conception and birth upon life experience, as understood in rebirthing terms, has been explored. I have introduced a schema of the body that radically opposes the widely accepted notion of the body in the developed world. In contrast to the bounded corporeality of the biomedical body, in rebirthing an energy body schema posits the physical body as surrounded by sheathes of energy: the emotional body, the mental body and the spiritual body. Through the recounting of the participants' experiences, primarily Gaylene's, we have accounts of the energy body model in action, demonstrating notions of embodiment, memory and agency as understood and experienced through rebirthing. Gaylene had two distinctive experiences of dis-embodiment: the first as a mechanism for removing long-standing fear from her body, and the second, a re-embodiment of a separated self. Both cases, from a rebirthing perspective, facilitated experiences that were of value to Gaylene and provided her with insights that informed and supported her throughout the training.

By drawing on the energy body schema, rebirthers perceive memory as much more than the bounded definition of Loftus. Memory can be seen to include the cosmological memory of the reincarnated spirit and the impact of inter-uterine experience and birth on the energetic bodies. Within rebirthing, memory contributes to construction of the self

through a narrative ... we cannot understand who we are, indeed cannot be who we are, except in dialogue with others ... we need to know where we stand in relation to others in order to know who we are, where we are at, and how to get where we want to go. (Smith 2012:7)

Birth heralds the beginning of a broader experience of the world beyond the uterus. Having explored the influence of conception and birth on memory and agency on the newborn, the next chapter addresses the impact of childhood upon the self. Parental disapproval and the effects of the education system are understood within the rebirthing field to have a significant effect on the construction of self. Through the ethnography of the second and third weekends of the rebirthing training, issues of agency will be more closely examined.

## 5

# **PDS, Education: childhood and agency, growth and learning**

### **Introduction**

In the years following your arrival from no-where to now-here, you were taught many beliefs about what you were capable of doing and what was impossible for you to do. You also learned from others your beliefs about religion, education, love and who your enemies were...The person you are today is primarily the result of interactions with the important adults in your growing-up environment. (Dyer 2001:37)<sup>40</sup>

In this chapter, I shall focus on the third and fourth weekends of the rebirthing training; Parental Disapproval Syndrome and Education respectively. I shall develop a case study using one particular participant, Simon, but also drawing on the experiences of the other participants at times to explore understandings of how the family, environment and education impacts on the development of the child's sense of self and their agency. To assist the ethnographic analysis of these two weekends, and the dynamics of Simon's behaviour, I shall interrogate the construction and employment of agency through the participants' primary relationships with family and school.

After reviewing agency within the rebirthing modality, I will explore theoretical perspectives reflecting Shelly Ortner's (1996:12) 'model of practice that embodies agency but does not begin with, or pivot upon, the agent, actor, or individual'. Ortner (ibid.:12) proposes that:

social life...consisting of webs of relationship and interaction between multiple, shiftingly interrelated subject positions, none of which can be extracted as autonomous "agents"; and yet at the same time there is "agency," that is, actors playing with skill, intention, wit, knowledge, intelligence.

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<sup>40</sup> Dr Wayne Dyer: American self-help author and motivational speaker.

I will then analyse the ethnography, demonstrating that whilst the ‘autonomous agent’ does not exist, rebirthing discourse posits the individual as responsible for the choices made and the subsequent course of their lives. What becomes evident from the ethnography is that the degree of agency practiced by the participants can and does vary in respect to the subjective experiences and understandings that they hold at any one time. By following the journey of one participant—Simon—this variability becomes apparent.

### **Parental Disapproval: ‘You’re a naughty little boy’**

The theme of the third weekend of the rebirthing training is Parental Disapproval Syndrome (PDS). The rebirthing premise is that children from an early age learn how to be in the world through social training from parents, which is influenced by their cultural background. As Margaret writes in the Participant Manual:

The principle of the Parental Disapproval Syndrome is one of loss of confidence in the self and the ability of the child to behave in a natural way, learning and exploring and making mistakes. Parental Disapproval is about “conditional love”. The one thing that is essential for the child’s growth besides physical nourishment is love.

When a child is constantly growled at and chastised it begins to believe that it is not GOOD. The belief of not being GOOD then causes a feeling of not being loved. A human being, who believes that it is not good or right, starts to lose confidence and becomes suppressed and depressed. Behavioural difficulties start when a child learns that even negative behaviour will create attention towards them and that they can control the parent by doing things that are impossible to ignore. (Unit Three: 4, original upper case).

It is the Friday night of the third training weekend. Most of the participants are gathered together around the dining table, chattering. There is an air of apprehension in the air. It is another weekend, another opportunity to go deeply within and explore the internal world in relation to the external world. Simon has yet to arrive. Very gregarious by nature, self-deprecating with a well-developed sense of humour and a large booming laugh, we have all warmed to his larger-than-life personality. He is approximately six-feet tall, fit and well built. Simon finally arrives just before the session is about to start and it is very apparent that he is drunk. His face is flushed, wet with perspiration, and he is very

boisterous and loud. Reeking of alcohol, Simon proudly boasts about the cigar he has just smoked in the car prior to arrival.

The rest of the group has lapsed into silence, watching him, waiting to see what will happen. In keeping with the usual course of events, we all go into the training room. Throughout the singing of that first song on Friday night, Simon is swaying on his feet; the other participants glance surreptitiously at him. I am fascinated that a participant would arrive at the training in this state and there is an air of disbelief permeating the room. The participants are mesmerised yet unsure of how to act in this situation in which Simon has so blatantly broken one of the agreements from the first weekend; an agreement to refrain from drinking alcohol or taking drugs of any kind during workshop hours. I find myself almost holding my breath. Simon's energy is like that of a cracker, about to explode. It is as if everyone in the room is thinking the same thought. 'How is Margaret going to handle this one?'

Everyone sits down and Robyn starts the sharing process. She talks at length about her school class and her son's wedding interstate. Participants are fidgeting—the air is thick with tension. I am distracted from Robyn's story, alert with the anticipation of Simon talking next. As I glance around the room, I sense that most of the other people have a similar feeling. Simon's turn eventuates and a loud, rambling tale emerges of his difficult relationship with Amelia, the estranged mother of his two-year-old son. He eventually finishes speaking and as the evening continues, Simon sits on his chair scowling with arms crossed, knees askance, bouncing his legs with nervous agitation.

In a later private interview, Paul tells me that he was confused as the agreements specified no drinking or smoking during the training sessions and yet Simon turned up 'full' and there were no consequences. Paul confides to me.

*I kept watching Margaret Friday night because I thought 'how's she going to deal with this one?' But it wasn't a situation where you could say to Simon, 'you're pissed, get out of here. Come back when you're dry'. That's Simon's whole life story and that's what he sets up, that's the sort of response he's looking for.*

Paul suggests in this account that Simon has the propensity to use negative behaviours to gain attention. Simon reflects later that he 'expected a bollocking from Margaret' after turning up 'pissed,' but no-one gave him any disapproval, including Margaret.

### **Agency: 100% responsibility, free will, and choice**

Concepts such as 100% responsibility, choice, freewill are utilised to infer the exercising of agency within rebirthing. Explicitly embedded throughout the training is the notion that the past has happened, and whilst the past cannot be changed, individuals have the power to change their responses to it. It is through the process of rebirthing that experiences of the past and the resultant beliefs about the self, and its place within community and the wider world, are brought into awareness or consciousness. From this conscious awareness, habitual dispositions are challenged, and the individual is thus presented with opportunities to choose a different response to the past and make new decisions about the future. Margaret describes this process as follows: 'Rebirthing gives people the opportunity to see and change thoughts and behaviours that were created in the past which are no longer relevant in the present time.' Discourse within rebirthing does not explicitly engage the term agency; however I am employing the term to analyse what it means to be 100% responsible, to exercise free will and to make choices within the rebirthing context.

Bourdieu (1977:72, original italics) proposes that the 'structures constitutive of a particular type of environment...produce *habitus*, systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures'. In other words, people and their engagement in their worlds are shaped by the specific cultural and social environment in which they live, and the subsequent specific habitus is deeply buried and accepted as the norm. As Ortner (2006:109) explains:

the subject internalizes the structures of the external world, both culturally defined and objectively real. These internalized structures form a habitus, a system of dispositions that incline actors to act, think, and feel in ways consistent with the limits of the structure.

Ahearn (2001:112) defines agency as 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act...both in its production and in its interpretation'. However the extent of this agency may vary depending upon the distinction between individuals as actors and individuals as agents where:

[t]he actor refers to a person engaged in action that is framed, as is all social action. An actor's action is rule governed or orientated. The agent refers to persons engaged in the exercise of power in its primary sense of the "bringing about of effects," that is, engaged in action that is constitutive. Agency implies the idea of "causal power" through which we realize the potential of the world. (Karp 1986:137)

That is, the actor is in the world following the status quo without question; their habitus is deeply embedded and taken-for-granted. In comparison, the agent is engaging proactively, employing a greater degree of awareness and consciousness in their choices of action. The agent is reflexive: having the capacity to perceive and know of wider forces that impact upon them, and subsequently, act intentionally (Giddens 1979:56). Giddens (ibid.:59) argues that 'the unacknowledged conditions of action: in respect of unconscious motives, operating or 'outside' the range of the self-understanding of the agent' may inhibit full reflexive understanding of the agent's position within their particular habitus. Ortner (2006:110) challenges this claim proposing that 'subjects are always at least partially "knowing"'. The subjective nature of agency is apparent, or as Ortner (ibid.:110) suggests:

subjectivity as the basis of "agency", a necessary part of understanding how people (try to) act on the world even as they are acted upon. Agency...takes shape as specific desires and intentions within a matrix of subjectivity—of (culturally constituted) feelings, thoughts, and meanings.

Furthermore subjects as agents are 'constructed by, and subjected to, the cultural and historical discourses within which they must operate' (Ortner 1996:1). Whilst it is vital to explore the range of identities and 'subject positions' that arise as a result of a particular framework, it is equally necessary to explore 'how actors "enact," "resist," or "negotiate" the world as given, and in so doing "make" the world' (ibid.:1). This intersection of these two positions, 'subject positions' and 'making the world' through action, provides a framework for agency.

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Ortner proposes two forms of agency: 'one of which is closely related to ideas of power...and another that is closely related to ideas of intention' (2001:78). Power relations are explored through concepts of domination and resistance. Resistance has long been touted as a valid form of agency for those in positions of submission. 'Where there is power, there is resistance' (Foucault 1979:95). It is through resistance that people negotiate within their subordinate positions to achieve their own personal goals or projects. Ortner's second form of agency is an 'agency of intentions – of projects, purposes, desires' (2001:79). However, this intentional agency may or may not necessarily be in response to domination or resistance. 'It is about people having desires that grow out of their own structures of life' (ibid.:81). Whilst these may be achieved within the confines of their cultural and social structures, there are also those who will move outside and beyond the normalised habitus to achieve their ends. It is the interweaving of power and intention that facilitates people's ability to both formulate and enact their projects. Agency, in all its nuances, from the 'unconscious motives' of Giddens to the intentional agency of Ortner, provides a flexible and encompassing definition with which to analyse the experiences of the rebirthing.

The rebirthing sense of agency is best understood in its application—through practice. Through the rebirthing training, and in particular the first three coursework weekends of Birth and Conception, PDS, and Education, rebirthing discourse constructs the socio-cultural environment of a child as the major factor that impacts on choices and the ability to make effective choices. As with any society, there are rules, institutions, traditions, and beliefs that directly and indirectly impact on a child. In rebirthing circles, it is acknowledged that the family is the primary environment in which a child develops, and the social world in which the child is raised impacts significantly on that development. As Ortner (2006:130-131) proposes:

the social embeddedness of agents [...] is always embedded in relations of (would-be) solidarity: family, friends, kin, spouses or partners, children, parents teachers, allies, and so forth [and] is always enmeshed within relations of power, inequality, and competition.

Therefore it may be inferred that in this environment a child learns beliefs, values and behaviours that enable it to act in the world. Furthermore, in the context of the rebirthing

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training, it becomes apparent that a primary response of the child to this early phase of their life is learning to please, or finding ways of gaining the attention of those caring for him/her:

By the time a child is two years of age it begins to exert its will. "The terrible twos" are well known and the child soon learns that expressing itself openly can be met with disapproval and lack of acceptance...The child learns to survive in the environment and adapt in order to get approval and love. The pattern then becomes one of a child becoming something other than itself, in order to be accepted by the parents. (Participant Manual, Unit Three: 4-5)

As such, the child may be seen to practice a limited form agency within their own social sphere:

Some beings rather than compromise themselves, withdraw and become insular...Others rebel against suppression...The behaviour that a child adopts in order to survive the home environment is often appropriate for that time but as an adult it can be very stifling and no longer needed. (ibid.: 5)

Embedded in rebirthing discourse is the notion that a child's ability to act, or agency, is determined, compromised and constrained by the family and social environment in which they are being raised. It is considered that children choose and adopt behaviours, which assist their survival, from an infinite variety of responses anywhere along the continuum from withdrawal to rebellion. However, these choices and behaviours may not support them in their adult lives and, as demonstrated in the previous chapters, the participants of the rebirthing training have expressed a desire to change, and rebirthing is their chosen vehicle for change. It is through the rebirthing training process that agency can be observed in action in its various forms; that the participants, through the revelations of their memories and narratives, are empowered to exercise greater intentional agency in their lives—a shift of agency from a taken-for-granted perspective to a conscious reflexive action. I shall now return to the actions and experiences of Simon to explore the nuances of agency. I shall demonstrate this shift in agency through Simon's experiences over the next two weekends.

Simon arrives twenty minutes late the following day and the session starts without him. Once again there is no acknowledgment of his being late; he is simply invited into the training space by Margaret who continues with the session. In this morning session,

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information is given out about the effects of disapproval from parents on the child, inviting discussion from the group about their personal experiences of parental criticism and their responses to it. As Margaret explains, 'When a child is criticised, they begin to think that they are bad. Through invalidation, they become demoralised and can resort to covert hostility.' From the Participant Manual Unit Three, covert hostility is defined as: 'covert—not intended to be seen or known, hostility—feeling of antagonism or anger'. As Margaret explains, their environment has not been safe so they are unable to voice their anger and they sit in fear. The only way they can cope with this is to resort to covert hostility which is quite often reflective of the environment in which they were raised.

The day continues with the group discussing the effect of parents on early childhood. They then focus on aspects of their lives when they were affected by disapproval. After watching several videos on childhood discipline, including smacking, the group have a discussion about their personal responses. Gaylene recalls an incident with her mother where she was sent outside to play. 'I just wanted to be with my mother, and I didn't understand why I was sent outside. I thought I must have done something wrong.' Gaylene expresses confusion by the lack of connection between her behaviour and the consequences that she experienced. Jonathon shares next.

*I can't remember being hit as a kid, but we got screamed at a lot and we got sent to our rooms without meals. My dad was a real screamer, really angry, so I learnt to keep quiet and keep out of their way. That's why reading in my bedroom was so much safer for me.*

While Jonathon retreated to his bedroom, for Paul, his father's disapproval of his politics and his sexuality resulted in him leaving home at the age of sixteen. He had also suffered sexual abuse as a child from two separate sources: from within the church and from his mentally-ill brother. In contrast to Jonathon and Paul, who cited their fathers as sources of disapproval, Simon focuses on his experience of his grandfather.

*My dad never smacked me but my granddad did quite a lot because I was always mucking around in his shed touching his shit where I shouldn't. It was pipes over the back of the head and that sort of stuff. I never really liked him and when he died I never shed a tear. I never felt any sorrow or affection for the guy. That's what you set yourself up for by doing that stuff.*

Lily shares:

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*After watching the movie on hitting children, I realised that I need to go home and have a talk to David again. (David is Lily's husband.) We have different views on discipline and circumcision. I believe in nurturing children and he believes in cutting things off and if you need to hit them you need to hit them.*

Margaret adds:

*The harm that hitting does to children is that it desensitises them like that little boy in the movie. He said, 'it doesn't hurt because I don't take any notice of it anymore', so he's already desensitised himself. He's shut down his own feelings and he's got nothing to refer to. So what happens is that while he can't feel for himself, he can't feel for others.*

Interestingly, the discussion around physical punishment invokes memories of school, the subject of the fourth weekend, and experiences of disapproval through the education system. Gaylene recalls a memory of being smacked at school.

*We were listening to one of those beautiful radio programs and we had the old desks with the pencil slot and you had your ruler above it. For some reason I reached up and touched my ruler and it dropped to the floor. The teacher came up and smacked me on the hand. Obviously I wasn't meant to be playing with the ruler while the radio program was on, but I remember feeling that it was a great injustice and I would never ever trust that person again. I worked hard at school because I found it difficult. I never did anything intentionally wrong and to smack me for that I thought was ridiculous.*

Gaylene's sharing of her school experience prompted another memory for Jonathon.

*I was in grade four and after recess a teacher called me aside and took me out into the hallway. I always played with the girls. I was a great hop-scotcher and rope-rumper and I just wasn't interested in what the boys were doing. She tore into me. 'You can't do that and that's not okay. You should be playing with the boys'. I remember for weeks after that just sort of wandering round the playground, it was really quite awful. I would stand around next to the girls just watching, not participating.*

Lily remembers starting school the year that corporal punishment within schools became illegal.

*My teacher was not happy about it and I distinctly remember this kid who kept getting up out of his chair. She got some fly-spray and sprayed his bottom with it because she said 'you've got ants in your pants'. They also kept the paddle that they used to use. They framed it and hung it up in the front office.*

Simon chimes in.

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*I was smacked a lot at school; ruler over the hand all the time; didn't used to hurt in the end. I was going to college in year seven so they gave me a really hard time in year five and six. Better break his spirit now. They'd say 'You think this is bad'. Whack. 'Just wait until you get to college.' I went straight home to mum and dad and said 'This college thing, not happening man'.*

However, despite Simon's expressed desire not to go to college, his parents' decision overrode his and he did go to college. Later he reflected on his behaviour within that environment.

*I was so bad at school. They really would like to have chucked me out I mucked about so much, except that I excelled at sport. And in a college, that's an important thing. Winning all those cups brings huge kudos to the school. They did all these tests on me and found out that I was too smart for my class. They put me up into the nerd class which kind of had a good effect on me because there was no-one to talk to in nerd class and I did my work. I had been so fucking bored up until then.*

Simon's story resonates with Paul.

*At my school, we used to keep a chart and have a betting pool. We'd put money in at the beginning of the week and see who got hit the most by the end of the week. We used to have chapel every morning but I used to go to the toilet and have a cigarette. I wasn't going to chapel. These dirty old men in frocks used to beat the shit out of us and then take us to chapel to pray to someone. I just didn't get it.*

Simon and Paul are both able to express a connection with their behaviour and the resulting disapproval and consequences. In contrast, as children, Jonathon and Gaylene, are unable to connect their behaviour with the disapproval they received. What is most evident from these stories is their reactions, and the various degrees and means of agency they each employed to deal with their situations. Simon, an inquisitive and active boy, continued to challenge his environment in spite of the consequences. Paul also challenged the status quo, though more covertly at school, then finally leaving home. Both Simon and Paul resisted the domination of their school experiences, whereas Jonathon and Gaylene reacted passively, withdrawing and reflecting on their confusion. Their actions, or agency, are curtailed and limited by their particular socio/cultural worlds, and more crucially, by the limiting factor of childhood. This is evident in the accounts of the participants of their childhood experiences, of both family and school, and is explicitly demonstrated in the following account of Simon's rebirth.

It is Sunday morning. All the participants, assistants and the trainer are in the refreshment area chatting until the program starts for the day. Simon is running late yet again. Ten minutes later, he finally arrives, visibly distressed and agitated. He is one huge ball of seething anger. We all move into the training room, Simon sits hunched in his chair, legs askance, eyes cast down and a deeply concentrated scowl on his face. A thick impenetrable fog hovers over him. The participants sit warily in his presence. Is he going to explode? How will the trainer manage what feels like a volatile situation? 'It's obvious that whatever is going on for you Simon needs to be handled before you can participate in the day. I suggest Elise take you up to the top room and rebirth you,' says Margaret. Grudgingly, Simon agrees.

He and I get up and head off to the rebirthing room. He follows me. I can sense his anger as he walks behind. We go into the room, I sit down in one chair and Simon sits in the other. 'I can't lie down and breathe' he throws at me, once again slumped in the chair, glowering. We sit in silence for some time. Then he starts talking. 'Amelia's giving me the shits. I tried to kiss her and she pushed me away with such a look of disgust on her face. I've been really upset since then'. We talk intermittently and finally Simon says that he is ready to lie on the mattress and breathe. He lies down on the mattress on the floor; I sit next to his head on the cushions by the mattress. He is still visibly angry, however starts the conscious connected breathing of the rebirthing process.

Within five minutes Simon's breathing becomes rapid, his face shifts from anger to wariness. He looks like a little boy. 'What's happening?' I ask. Gradually the memory unfolds of him as a four year old being chased around the orchard by his older brother Garth who is absolutely incandescent with rage. He has obviously done something wrong to invoke such rage in his brother but is unable to remember what it was. Simon recalls running into his bedroom, jamming the door shut with his knees, his back against the wardrobe and at the same time, trying to open the bedroom window so he can escape outside to avoid being caught by Garth. This is all very clear to him and the emotion, (the excitement of the chase, the need to avoid capture, being scared of what his brother would do to him), that he was experiencing at the time is evident in the telling through both his recounting of the event and the reactive response in his body. His head moves from side to side, his torso and limbs are in constant motion.

However, Simon does not stay with this memory. He rapidly moves onto another incident when he was aged three. His parents are arguing in the house. He can hear his father shouting loudly and his mother is afraid. 'Tell me about it', I ask. A process of Simon exploring his memory with prompts such as: 'Tell me about it.' 'What happened next?' 'How did you feel at that time?' The complete story unfolds.

*I was in my bedroom and I could hear Mum and Dad arguing. I didn't understand what was going on so I went into Garth's bedroom to see if he knew what was going on. When I looked in, he was just sitting there, cowering, with this very scared look on his face. So I went into Sally's room and she was on her bed crying. I knew then that they were both really scared and weren't going to do anything about it. I wasn't scared so I went down the passage to go and see what was happening and fix it. I got to the door and looked in and realised that I couldn't do anything about it; I got scared and went back to my room. Then Garth yelled at me saying it was all my fault that Mum and Dad were arguing; that I made it happen. I was really upset with what Garth said. I didn't understand how I made it happen; why it was my fault. So I went outside and got under the house where it was dark. I was scared of the dark but I sat there and kept telling myself that I wasn't scared. I stayed there for a long time practising not being scared.*

By the time the full story had been told, most of the emotion that Simon had visibly been feeling during the telling has diminished and his demeanour has almost returned to normal. At this point I ask him, 'what decision did you make?' He replies, 'I have to look after everyone. Everyone else is scared, including Mum and Dad. I'm the only one not scared, so I have to look after them all'. I ask Simon, 'So if you're three years old and you make this decision to look after everyone, what effect has that had on your life?' Simon laughs wryly.

*Well I'm fucked aren't I? I can't do it; it's impossible for me to do that, look after everyone at three years old, at any age really. My whole life's been fucked really. Maybe that's why I feel as though I've never really been successful at anything in my life.*

I sit quietly as he reflects on the various aspects of his life that he feels have been compromised by this belief he made at three years of age. He has verbalised the impossibility of the task that he set himself and lapses into silence. Eventually he opens his eyes, sits up and comments, 'That was incredible; I feel fantastic. All that heaviness and anger and stuff has gone'.

This episode demonstrates the practice of agency within the rebirthing framework. Simon is raised as a third child in what appears to be a volatile family environment.

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Confronted as a three-year-old child with arguing parents, and siblings who are in a state of fear, Simon reacts differently to his siblings. Following the course of events as described by Simon in his rebirth, he subsequently makes decisions about himself and his place within the family structure that has long-term implications for Simon. Firstly, deciding that he cannot be scared whilst the rest of his family are, and secondly, deciding that he has to look after everyone, are both decisions of which he was previously unaware. However, whilst Simon invokes an agency of intention deciding to take care of his family, his powerlessness as a child prohibits him from achieving this intention. Conversely, he appears to have maintained the intention of fearlessness through his ability to confront teachers, his parents, even arrive drunk and late at the rebirthing training. Through the rebirthing process, these beliefs are brought into Simon's awareness, which then makes it possible for Simon to recognise the implications of these decisions, not only as a three year old, but also for his adult life. He makes the connection between his lack of success as a child to look after everyone, to his perceived lack of success throughout his life and as an adult. Simon admits, 'You know I'm not really afraid of very much at all'. He laughs.

Meanwhile, in the training room, the remainder of the group has a discussion about Simon arriving inebriated on Friday night. As Margaret explains,

*No-one made him wrong for turning up drunk. This morning he just sat here, Lily held his hand and he cried a bit. That's the discomfort for him. When we stop making people wrong, they'll actually start doing it to themselves. That's exactly what happened for Simon because we didn't say 'you rotten bastard coming here drunk'. He's not getting the disapproval he's accustomed to so he's got nothing to rail against and it's really uncomfortable for him.*

The rebirthing perspective is based on the assumption that parental disapproval and ongoing disapproval from other authority figures have contributed significantly to the construction and maintenance of Simon's beliefs about himself. He recognises that the decision, as a three year old, to look after everyone has failed and is being reflected by his belief that he has 'never really been successful at anything' in his life. This lack of success is then reinforced by disapproval from his family, school, and the behaviour of Amelia, which triggered this episode for Simon. By Margaret and the group not reacting to Simon's behaviour, the usual disapproval and subsequent internal validation of his own lack of success were not externally activated and, as Margaret suggests, Simon is

then faced with an opportunity, through rebirthing, to review his past and experience his life from a new viewpoint.

After his rebirth, Simon returns into the training room to the claps and cheers of the group. Jonathon comments, 'You're here, and you really add such a wonderful dimension to all of this'. Simon replies, 'Thanks man—don't worry; you won't get rid of me'. He lets out a huge booming laugh. 'I've got a bit more courage left in me yet—quite a lot actually'. Margaret comments, 'It took a lot to get you here today'. Simon answers; 'Sure did. I saw a trash and treasure on the way. I thought I could run in there and spend the morning going over the junk'.

That Sunday afternoon, the trainees undertake their practice rebirthing sessions with one another. This is Simon's second rebirth for the day. Afterwards, Simon recounts his experiences of both rebirths. 'I thoroughly recommend two a day.' Another booming infectious laugh emerges from Simon.

*The one this morning was about me when I was three and I went through this thing of taking on all the responsibility of the world and I really allowed myself to bring it all up.*

In this way, Simon practices agency in over-riding any cultural norms about suppressing or monitoring emotional feeling and expression.

*Then Elise said something about just go off and be with yourself when you were three and muck around, do what he wants do to. 'Tell him it's all okay' so I did that. So when nothing much was happening in the second rebirth, I went to a sandpit to play with the three year old again. Then I started going through different phases of my life. I went to me when I was sick with glandular fever, I must have been twelve. I sat with myself there a while and told myself I was still alright. And then went to when I was a teenager and I did it again about something that happened to me and told myself again that I was alright. Then all of a sudden, I turned up for me, like the older me turned up and did it to me which was a really nice feeling; it was fucking bizarre. I had a bit of a chat with myself from the future. Seems to think I'm doing everything alright and I'll be alright. All of a sudden I noticed somebody else was there. It was my dad so I had a bit of a love-in with my dad, really out there man, that whole dad thing. I got a bit emotional a couple of times when I was saying goodbye. I then realised that I had wings on my back. Master Sam over here said 'Well, go for a fly mate, try them out'. And so I did. I went up there and flew off for a while; it was night time, and then I came back Jesus...best drug I've ever taken, and it's free. All the way through I was getting these good feelings and Sam said 'Well grab these feelings and put them somewhere'. I was putting them in my stomach for a while, thought, well that's where I store everything and then I realised, that I don't really want them around my waist, so I put them in my legs and my hips.*

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*Yeah I put them in my pockets. That's why it felt so right. So I'm a bit blissed out man, feeling very good about it; transformation—fantastic.*

Simon's rendering of his experiences of the two rebirths is continually punctuated by his loud infectious laugh. His face is lit up, his body fully expressive as he talks. The group is spellbound, joining in with his laughter; his apparent 'bliss' is palpable in the room. Simon describes how the information gained from the first rebirth of the day led to the understanding of how he believed he had 'fucked up' his life. Then in his second rebirth, Simon recounts re-experiencing other episodes in his life, not only from the past, but also into the future, all the while telling himself that he is 'alright'. Alternative states of consciousness are attributed to and embedded within rebirthing practice, evident in the experiences of Simon, and Gaylene in the last chapter. However as Margaret explains,

*I don't use the term 'altered states of consciousness' with the participants or clients as I don't want to set up expectations. I just let them know that anything can happen during a rebirth and we will deal with whatever happens. What I do say is that rebirthing changes perceptions about how life is, and how things are.*

If consciousness refers to the individual awareness of one's thoughts, memories, feelings, sensations and environment, the term '*altered states of consciousness* [which] was first used by Ludwig<sup>41</sup>...denote[s] alterations in the perception of self and the surroundings that are different from everyday waking consciousness' (Sidky 2009:174, italics in original ). Simon recounts experiences in his rebirth that he likens to the drug-induced states of consciousness of his past. He sits with his child-self and future-self having dialogue with both. Realising he has wings on his back, in this altered state of consciousness Simon describes utilising those wings for flying. He likens his experience to a 'transformation' reflecting the 'therapeutic changes that [have taken] place in the patient's mind/body' (ibid.:171). From the rebirthing perspective, the first rebirth brings to light episodes in Simon's childhood that have significantly impacted on his adult life. During the second rebirth, Simon uses the information to reframe his childhood experiences. Whilst in a state of altered consciousness produced by the conscious

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<sup>41</sup> "'altered states of consciousness"...any mental state(s), induced by various physiological, psychological, or pharmacological manoeuvres or agents, which can be recognised subjectively by the individual himself (or by an objective observer of the individual) as representing a sufficient deviation in subjective experience or psychological functioning from certain general norms for that individual during alert, waking consciousness.' (Ludwig 1966:225)

connected breathing pattern, Simon converses with himself, changing his previous beliefs about himself to him being 'alright'.

Paul comments in a later interview: 'It was just miraculous to see him walk out on the Sunday night, just so calm, and ready to take on whatever life was going to throw him this week'. When Simon returns in a fortnight for the mid-month evening and rebirth, he is relaxed, contented, and in his own energetic hilarious way, regales the group with stories of life on the farm, chasing the cows and building a chook pen. Simon has retained the same enthusiasm with which he left on the Sunday evening of the PDS weekend. However, that changes by the time the group comes together for the Education weekend.

### **Education: even more disapproval**

As Margaret explains at the beginning of the Education weekend, the fourth weekend of the training:

*The experience of schooling and education for some people was not one of natural exploration but one of constrictive rules. Many rebirthing clients describe their schooling experience as one of negative times and memories of that time often produces sadness and regret.*

Margaret expands, citing a number of factors that can impact on a child's experience of school including prior threats made by parents such as: 'You wait till you get to school, they'll straighten you out'; the child not wanting or being ready to start school; specific learning difficulties; no variation in teaching styles to accommodate the child's personality; bullying and name calling; feeling like they don't 'fit in'; and over-disciplinarian teachers. Education experiences can also reactivate a child's parental issues about feeling important within the family. Effectively, in rebirthing, education is an extension on PDS through the transference of this disapproval to other forms of authority like the education system. This transference is evident in the early part of this chapter when the participants, whilst exploring parental disapproval, moved onto drawing on their own schooling experiences to illustrate personal experiences of disapproval.

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Simon shares with the group on Friday night. It is apparent from what Simon says that the euphoria of the previous training weekend had left him over the previous two weeks since the mid-month session. He is sitting in his chair, looking down, hunched over with his elbows on his knees. As he starts talking, he maintains the body posture, however intermittently lifts his head and engages eye contact with the group. In a moderate voice he talks.

*I didn't want to come back here again; I really don't want another month like that again. I just couldn't see anything; I was just floating adrift somewhere, it sucked man. I'm not working. I haven't any money. I've dropped out of uni—like it all fell apart; and I lay in bed for most of the month. The other day I went out and sat at the back in this kind erosion ditch and that was kind of pleasant. I was going to do it yesterday but it was raining so I drank instead. I started by myself at ten o'clock so by two pm I was fucking drunk. I couldn't drive anywhere so kept drinking till I made myself sick again. I tell you I hate listening to myself man, all this bloody whinging and drama and I'm doing this rebirthing and I'm in a process; it just fucking annoys me. I just want to plod along, avoid all my issues. I survived thirty six years without all this fucking thing—I'm a bit over rebirthing.*

Throughout his story, Simon punctuates various points by listlessly flipping a forearm or hand. By the time he has finished speaking, Simon is sitting in a more upright position. A mixture of sadness and futility sits on his face. The group moves on without any comment on Simon's state.

Paul also has had a difficult time.

*It's just been one meltdown after another really. The last two weeks has been probably the most chaotic in my life and I don't really want to be here. Even so, I feel really safe in here, but I'm sorry if I cry a lot. I'm fifty three years old. (Paul struggles to hold back his tears.) I've been the tower of strength to my family and friends and career, and it's just I don't know where it's gone and I want it back. I feel like I'm between a rock and a hard place. My partner left me but he's back. It was just a night; he needed a change of nappies so he came home. It's just been one big drama after another really.*

Both are experiencing difficulties. Both are articulate and honest with what they share with the group. There is change happening in their lives, and at the moment, both are finding this change challenging to the point where their emotions are surfacing: Simon primarily anger, Paul sadness. Both of them express a lack of control in their lives, limitations in agency that are reflected in their respective narratives—'I just want to plod along, avoid all my issues,' 'I feel like I'm between a rock and a hard place'. The experience of change is difficult and painful for both Simon and Paul. Their

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powerlessness is evident in their narratives, intentional agency has diminished; Simon's to the point where 'like it all fell apart'.

Simon's story continues on Saturday morning. He is slumped in his chair, glowering with his legs askance and arms crossed.

*Simon: I'd like to be a bit more comfortable now. It's all just a bit overwhelming, I just want to get in my car and my dog and my swag, drive up the Flinders. I don't want to look at anything and face anything. I've got the farm, my mum, the family, Amelia and...*

*Margaret: Yes and you've got the rebirthing and the thing around money. And you know you're drinking too much.*

*Simon: I was alright until rebirthing came along; it's just fucked my life up. Now all I've got is fucking chaos. I haven't been able to do anything except lie around and not really think of anything.*

*Margaret: So what are you feeling right now?*

*Simon: I'm fucked off. I knew when I was six, I had this plan, had a vision; now it's all fucked. It's making me feel worse, get out of your discomfort shit, costing me a shit load of money and it's doing me no good.*

Margaret draws Simon's attention back to major themes of rebirthing—namely personal responsibility and change.

*There's a transition that you need to go through, and for some reason, you've chosen to do it that way. There are other people who have chosen to go through this process and not given up on their plan and not given up on their jobs and not laid around all day and that is their choice.*

*Simon: So you're saying it's my fault.*

Simon sits up straight and stiffens in his body. His attention is focussing on Margaret. The tension is evident in his voice.

*Margaret: And your choice is not wrong. This is not about blame; this is about giving you the facts. The facts are that your process has been..... (Simon interrupts.)*

*Simon: But you kind of make me feel like... 'look you've done it to yourself'. I'm just coming along here and you're leading me through this process supposedly.*

*Margaret: Yes and you're given 100% responsibility for your own process.*

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*Simon: Well it has been hard for me this last fucking month. I didn't have a choice. I could have kept going at uni, kept working, kept everything going, kept my mum in my life. All of that was going to make me fucking pop. I had to stop all those things.*

*Margaret: So you've made some change haven't you?*

*Simon: Yeah, change to stop everything and start again.*

*Margaret: It is what it is. There's nothing wrong with you Simon.*

*Simon: No there never was; I feel like there is now. (He pauses.) Fucking hell, I feel like I'm having some sort of breakdown and my life's falling down around my ears.*

*Margaret: You can't keep doing what you were doing and become successful. If this is your way forward then that's your way forward. I think you're making it wrong. You can't make the process wrong when the process is actually working for you. And this change is extremely uncomfortable for you. What you're actually doing is healing on yourself. Stopping and being by yourself, that's part of your process. And it's not wrong...it just is.*

*Simon: I know. But when I'm just sitting down and writing a fifteen point plan working out how I'm going to manage the farm and mum and Amelia and stuff like that—I've never done it before.*

*Margaret: The experience you're having now is uncomfortable. And at some level it is your choice because everything you've done up until this time has brought you to this point. So when you started this course you had so much stuff to unload that you did go into overwhelm. It is called emotional healing and it's always uncomfortable as it is at times of change. The more you get used to feeling uncomfortable in a time of change, the more change you'll do and the easier it becomes. What concerns me is that you keep using alcohol to cover up your discomfort. The best way to suppress all your emotions and your feelings and your angst and your upsets is to go off and have a drink.*

In this encounter, Simon is initially drawing on past behaviour as explored during the PDS weekend, lapsing into being overwhelmed by his responsibilities. As a child, deciding to take care of everyone and failing, is re-enacted in his experience of the last few weeks. His powerlessness to effectively deal with the issues in his life has compromised his choices. With the intention of assisting Simon to engage his adult self as the active agent as opposed to relapsing into the child agent, Margaret continually challenges Simon by reminding him of his adult agency; '100% responsibility', that he is making his 'choice', that he is making 'change'. From a rebirthing perspective, 100% responsibility provides the opportunity to exercise both an agency of power and an agency of intention.

As demonstrated by the alternate choices made by Jonathon and Gaylene in comparison to Simon and Paul, agency may be enacted by children. For Simon,

choosing to 'stop all those things' is agency in action despite his being 'alright until rebirthing came along'. However, rebirthing discourse implicitly and explicitly proposes that through greater self-awareness of the effects of the past, the individual is empowered to make choices in the future for positive change. At this point, Simon sees rebirthing and his choices as negative: 'I feel like I'm having some sort of breakdown and my life's falling down around my ears.' However Margaret continually draws Simon back to the rebirthing perspective where the individual is the agent in any decision or action irrespective of their history or current situation.

## **Conclusion**

The individual experiences and subsequent decisions made by participants through their childhood, whether from disapproval from parents, family or other sources including the education system, all impacted on their ability to act within their own milieu. This is evident through the accounts of Jonathon and Gaylene, who have chosen to retreat from the world, and Simon and Paul, who resisted their moulding. As Ortner (1995:187) states:

The importance of subjects (whether individual actors or social entities) lies not so much in who they are and how they are put together as in the projects that they construct and enact. For it is in the transformation and enactment of those projects that they both become and transform who they are, and that they sustain or transform their social and cultural universe.

By focussing on the journey of Simon through these two weekends, the concept of agency within the rebirthing framework has been illuminated. Simon's arriving drunk at the training, in direct opposition to the agreements made on the first night of the training, precipitated a course of events requiring Simon to confront his own circumstances. Using Simon as a case study, the long-term effects of an incident early in his life were revealed as these decisions surfaced into Simon's consciousness during the first rebirth. Admitting to a continuous sensation of 'feeling as though I've never really been successful at anything in my life', these decisions resulted in Simon practicing a mode of agency in childhood that he took into his adult life. Through the rebirthing process, Simon became conscious of these choices. Between the two course weekends, Simon's practice of agency swung from being active and engaged to lapsing back into his

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drinking habit after a few weeks and blaming rebirthing for his inability to maintain his personal responsibilities. As Margaret proposed, 'Simon is moving through a transitional process which is always uncomfortable.' Margaret encourages Simon to recognise the choices he makes from an adult perspective and the necessity for his being 100% responsible for his outcomes. Following Simon's journey across the temporal space between and including the PDS and education training weekends, the fluidity of agency practice is evident; as Simon's self-perceptions changed, so did his ability to engage effectively in his world—in rebirthing terminology reflecting the level of responsibility for his life. As Smith (2012:8) proposes:

the self is a story we tell our self about our self, while at the same time being a story that we tell others about our self ... it is also the story that others tell us (and each other) about who we are. This interplay between the singular psyche/subject/self and culture/society is reciprocal and mutually constitutive.

Having covered aspects of early childhood and the education process, the next weekend on fear provides an opportunity to fully explore the embodied experience of emotion within the rebirthing field.

## 6

### **Fear: embodied emotion**

Fear [...] is the embodied evaluation that some aspect of the environment is dangerous. (Colombetti & Thompson 2008:52)

#### **Introduction**

The Fear weekend is the midpoint of the rebirthing training, and marks the metaphorical transition from childhood to adulthood. Until this time, the training has encouraged participants to reflect on the effects of childhood on their construction of self and relationships within their environments. The major event of the fear weekend is a day spent participating in a high-ropes course where the participants are required to embody the principles of personal responsibility, a theme that is continuously drawn upon during the second half of the rebirthing training.

Margaret (Trainers Manual, Unit Five: 1, original upper case) writes:

This weekend on fear always needs a challenging body process, preferably one that is outdoors and allows the participants to experience and feel the sensations of fear in their bodies. They need the opportunity to be able to breathe through fear sensations in their bodies and to overcome the ILLUSIONS that are created by the feeling of fear.

The rebirthing training perspective proposes that by placing the participants' physical bodies into an activity that will activate acute fear, behaviours under stress become heightened in all aspects, that is, physically, emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. The aim of the exercise, according to Margaret, is to give the participants an opportunity to feel and overcome fear in their body, using the breath to moderate their fear. Margaret reports a wide range of responses. Some people collapse into the fear physically and emotionally, embodying the fear, others are 'frozen' in fear, and yet others may block it out. As Margaret further proposes, by placing the participants in an unfamiliar and stressful environment, the trust that the participants have built amongst themselves is

put to the test. From her experience, Margaret has observed that with ample support and the sense of safety created through their teams, the participants can be encouraged and supported to challenge themselves to move on the high rope elements<sup>42</sup>. In this way, Margaret's intention is for the participants to confront their personal fears, become aware of their responses, and consider how this experience will enable them to make choices in the future. The 'bodily experience' of emotion is significant and essential when 'investigating the lived experience of emotion' (Dennis 2007:xii). It is the emotional responses to the embodied experience of fear presented that will guide and inform the participants, enabling responses and actions.

This chapter focuses on the embodied experience of fear, drawing on the concept of the body energy schema from Chapter Three. Through the shift in physical space as the participants are removed from the safe space of the training program to one in which their physical, emotional and mental bodies will be challenged, the dynamic between space, emotion, and sensual experience—the embodied experience—is heightened. An analysis of the experiences of three participants, Robyn, Gaylene and Lily, will provide a range of embodied experiences and responses to this enterprise. Through their accounts, embodiment and its impact on agency, choice and change will be illuminated. Whilst these women have three diverse experiences of the ropes course, rather than their responses to the challenge being graded in degrees of success, the focus within the training remains on experiential learning—the ongoing cycle of 'experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting' (Kolb & Kolb 2005:194) as outlined in Chapter Three. The contrasting experiences of the high-ropes course for these three women demonstrate the flexibility of the training process and its ability to facilitate the individual and personal journeys of each participant.

### **Fear and Rebirthing: conquering fear is not the goal**

It is Friday night and all the participants have arrived. They are apprehensive as they know there is a process this weekend designed to challenge their responses to fear. Margaret has alluded to this activity frequently during the training, building the tension

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<sup>42</sup> A term for the various climbing structures, each posing a different experience thus different challenges for the climber.

within the group. There is much nervous chatter and speculation about what that activity might be. The group move into the training room and the ritual song is sung, and the participants share what has been happening since the last get-together, after which Margaret moves onto the main theme of the weekend—fear. She tells the group, ‘the definition of fear is ‘the act of being afraid’. Margaret also describes fear as ‘the feeling of anxiety or dread and the agitation experienced at the presence of real or perceived danger’.

Anxiety, dread and agitation have already been experienced by the group prior to the nature of the activity being revealed. Over the previous weekends, Margaret has used every opportunity to gradually create a fear of this ‘unknown’ activity in the minds of the participants. Later during the evening, Margaret adds,

*Reasonable fear is a useful emotion to feel, as it will keep a person safe. The distinction must be made between those who have a feeling of fear in their body when something dangerous is about to happen and those people who live in a constant state of fear.*

Margaret then creates a flip chart demonstrating the acronym: ‘FEAR: False Evidence Appearing Real’. A discussion takes place amongst the group about this flipchart, during which Margaret emphasises that people accept unsubstantiated evidence, which then produces and maintains the fear. She reiterates the necessity of telling oneself the truth about false evidence to assist in alleviating this fear. Margaret then asks the group, ‘What are your greatest fears?’

Whilst the training has consistently promoted honesty within the group, ‘speaking the truth’ is emerging as a significant factor in this weekend. The safety that Margaret set up through the space, parameters, rules, and the design of the program, has enabled various people to reveal themselves in varying degrees of honesty. A comment from one of the participants highlights how the ability to speak honestly is reliant on degrees of trust.

*I love being at Margaret’s, it’s such a nurturing environment. I trust Margaret absolutely implicitly which is a connection I don’t make with many people which stems from my lack of trust in myself; just how much I want to give myself to someone.*

Another participant comments.

*I really love this group, I feel very relaxed. And whether it's the group or whether it's just my intention to be just completely open and honest because I decided if I'm going to do this I'm going to do it properly.*

And another,

*I was a bit apprehensive talking about parents and parental things; almost as if my mother was standing behind me and, pointing a finger and saying 'don't say anything that's untoward'. Then I thought, 'this isn't about my parents, it's about me'. So I just started talking and I felt quite comfortable doing it because there's no judgement in the group.*

Returning to Margaret's question about their greatest fears, Gaylene is clear with her response; she takes no time to think about her reply. 'Loneliness, sadness, poverty, life will be hard, health, rejection, and safety.' Paul has a different response: 'I think the overwhelming one for me is just the fear of the unknown. So I stay within a world that I know and I'm safe in.' Margaret cuts in: 'So that stops you from changing. If you make a change what might happen?' Paul replies: 'I might do it really badly and fuck it up.' Robyn's fear is similar to Paul's. 'It's just the unknown I guess. I'd want to know what the change is. I can take a risk'. Margaret challenges Robyn: 'No you can't, and I'll tell you why. If you're going to take a risk and you want to know what the outcome is, there is no risk.'

The energy in the room is charged. Each participant is sitting nervously in their seats; the disquiet in the room is palpable. Margaret's challenging of Robyn heightens the tension in the room. Coupled with Margaret's confrontation of the participants' responses, it is like the fear of the next day's activity is building. Margaret then challenges the whole group. She is intently serious.

*You're actually listening to your own limitations basically. Don't listen to them. They're not true. You cannot bullshit your whole way through life because if you do, you're going to rip yourself off. And that's not what you're here to do. So let's start telling the truth. From now on you've actually come out of the child stage of this course. Now it's time to take big responsibility. Tomorrow if you don't take responsibility people could hurt themselves.*

Once again, it is like an electric shock reverberating through the room. The activity for Saturday is still unknown, and the tension is increasing. At this point, Margaret links issues of honesty with responsibility. Their ability to be honest, chiefly with themselves,

and reveal their self-limiting beliefs, from Margaret's perspective, may have a direct impact on the safety of the next day's activity. The concepts of honesty and responsibility, plus choice and change, will be drawn on frequently by Margaret and reverberate throughout the following two days.

The remainder share their greatest fears. Simon starts. 'Mine's not being good enough, not being worthy, fucking things up, not being loveable, and success.' Margaret responds. 'Tell my why you're afraid of success. What do you have to do to have success?' Simon replies, 'I don't know.' After a short brainstorming session by the whole group, 'responsibility' is revealed to be the answer. Puzzled, Simon echoes 'responsibility?' 'Yes, it's tough. Responsibility is hard', replies Margaret. Simon quips: 'yeah it is. I've got too much of that at the moment; I'd like a lot less. Margaret jumps at his response linking fear and responsibility.

*Can you hear that? Can you hear the fear of the responsibility? But we learn from our parents that responsibility is boring and we never ever want to grow into it. And I know lots of young, mostly men actually, that don't want to become like their fathers because their fathers had so much responsibility. They trudged off to work with a kit bag and they'd come back every night and they do exactly the same every day. They look at their fathers and say 'I'm never doing that'.*

The confessions of fears continue. For Lily, it is 'not being accepted, lack of success and poverty'. Jonathon shares 'I'm not worthy, and disapproval'. Margaret picks up with Jonathon's fears.

*If you've got so much fear of judgement and disapproval it might even be your own fear and judgement about yourself, disapproval of yourself. Then it will stop you from changing. Can you see where all this is going? Your whole lives are being held up by installed fear.*

'Installed fear', according to the rebirthing model, is that which the foetus or child receives from an external source. It may be from the woman with an unplanned pregnancy, or the family is experiencing financial hardship. It may result from the birthing process itself, the first-time mother terrified of the ordeal. Alternatively the birth may result in the newborn holding cellular memory of fear: the shock of entering this alien world with its sensory overload; separation from the mother; rapid cutting of the umbilical cord and the subsequent sudden cessation of oxygen thus forcing the baby to gasp cold

dry air over the tiny delicate lung membranes in order to survive (Participant Manual, Unit Five: 8).

Margaret reads from the Participant Manual (Unit Five, Fear: 12, upper case in original):

A baby born in the environment of fear can suffer for years as a child and adult. The understanding of this is that even though the fear was present the baby was 'safe' and still alive. The conclusion from that is that 'fear keeps you safe', to some extent that is true but LIVING IN FEAR will also cause grave nervous disorder and psychological distress.

Throughout this exchange, Margaret is proposing that seemingly functional people, who are operating with varying degrees of success in their worlds, harbour fears that impact on the way they view themselves and subsequently limit their capacity to function fully in their lives. Jonathon hides in books, Lily doesn't speak up, Paul and Robyn find the unknown frightening, Gaylene fears loneliness, Simon and Jonathon view themselves as 'not good enough' and 'not worthy'. Their lives are all limited by beliefs about themselves, and subsequent fears impacting on the degree of agency with which they operate.

The final part of Friday night involves the revealing of the activity on Saturday. Margaret announces, 'What we're doing tomorrow is a high ropes course'. Lily squeals with excitement. Likewise, Simon receives the information with a smile on his face. Robyn declares, 'That's what I thought it was going to be. I've done a high-ropes course before'. Jonathon and Gaylene simultaneously launch into tirades of fear and terror, especially regarding the height factor, and Paul sits quietly reflecting in his bean bag.

Margaret continues. 'You're going to be taught to look after each other. It is about responsibility and working in teams. You'll feel the fear in your body. The idea is that you keep moving because the greatest way to conquer fear is how?' Jonathon quips, 'Work through it'. Sam adds, 'Feel the fear and do it anyway'. Margaret affirms their responses.

*Yes. Repetitive acts of courage. You can't have courage if you haven't got fear. So tomorrow is an opportunity to see how you can access your courage in the face of fear. This is not going to conquer the actual fear. And unless you're actually taught this bit, you can miss the whole point. This weekend is where the truth gets exposed. Up there on the wires you can't*

*bluff your way through anymore. It will pull out where you aren't taking responsibility in your lives.*

Within rebirthing, eliminating or conquering fear is not the goal. The desired outcome is having the courage to confront and manage their fear utilising their breath. Within rebirthing, holding the breath is understood to be the most common response to fear. Conversely, consciously maintaining a breathing cycle is seen to assist in counteracting the embodied experience of fear.

Once again, Margaret asks the participants to verbalise their 'biggest fear' now that they are aware of what the activity of the next day entails. Lily admits, 'the dark and that prevents me from being powerful'. For Gaylene it is 'loneliness. Tomorrow it will be heights, paralysed by heights but I will work through the fear'. Paul reiterates what he said earlier in the evening. 'Mine is the unknown and risk-taking.' However, Robyn changes her fear from 'the unknown' to 'I think it's about trust; trusting myself and other people. Self-trust is one of my issues'.

Margaret picks up on the issue of trust. 'How do you build trust?' Jonathon comments: 'We've been building trust amongst ourselves over the last five months'. Sam chimes in: 'Making agreements and seeing if they get kept'. 'Yes', says Margaret. 'The way you build trust is you make small agreements and keep them. People who do not keep their small agreements are not likely to keep their large agreements'. This exchange prompts a response from Gaylene: 'I feel comfortable that the group is going to be there for me but I don't know if I will be there for myself. Blind panic; I don't know what I'll do.' After some ongoing discussion about trust, Margaret winds up the evening with:

*It's really mastery to be able to overcome your fears to be able to make yourself do something that your body's going 'no, no, no, no' and your brain's going 'you're 100% safe'. This weekend is a turning point for most people in this training. The fear weekend is not necessarily about fear itself, but how you play the game. Games are an indication of your behaviour, so during tomorrow's exercise, I will be able to see you in the true light of day.*

As the participants leave that night, there is much discussion in the hallway. The degree of apprehension has escalated for several participants, particularly Jonathon and Gaylene. Robyn, Simon and Lily are comfortable with the prospect, Paul remains self-contained and silent. I asked him what he is thinking about the next day's activity. 'I'm

shitting myself actually. I have to go home and prepare myself—his quiet reflection in stark contrast to the over-animated, garrulous interactions from Jonathon and Gaylene.

### **Inverting the Safe Space**

As explored in Chapter Three, Margaret has undertaken numerous specific steps to create a space of safety in which the participants have, over the last five weeks, gradually built trust with one another and begun the process of being more honest with themselves and the group. By introducing a high-ropes course this weekend, an alternative space is produced which I shall explore along three parameters: first as space as place; second, space in relationship; and third, through space and emotion.

Reflecting on space as place, the domain of the high-ropes course is an inversion the safe space created within the training along temporal, spatial, and psychological parameters. All the familiar surroundings and structures have been removed. Not only are the participants required to experience a new space in the usual two-dimensional aspects, but the added spatiality of height is introduced, producing a common, and at times not unreasonable, fear in many people. Now they are required to negotiate and experience their bodies in an unfamiliar mode within an environment that is purposefully 'dangerous' to incite fear in the participants. Though being on the ground amongst trees is familiar for most mature adults, climbing ladders, foot pegs and negotiating ropes strung between trees ten to fifteen metres in the air is unknown territory.

The high-ropes course is introduced into the training to challenge the participants' relationships with one another, and their relationship with the environment. Space in relationship is analysed through the body energy schema in which the space between people is understood to be constructed of energy—the 'bio-energetic field'—altering the nature of that space. In this way, the space between people is thus transformed. It's no longer an empty space but one of matter—energy—that is imbued with potential—the potential for inscribing an alternative meaning of connection and interaction between people. It is this space *between* that this particular activity foregrounds: the space between people, and between people and things as the 'bio-energetic fields' of the participants and the inanimate intermingle, transforming the space and relationality of

these encounters. The interaction between individuals and the trees and apparatus is critical to the embodied experience of the ropes course. As such, 'the body is conceived not in its individual, biologically bounded form, [but is] extended to include its social relations' (Lyon & Barbalet 1994:55), in this setting to include the inanimate as well.

The social relations between people, and people and things, leads to the third aspect of space—that of emotion. As Davidson & Milligan (2004:523, italics in original) suggest, the 'articulation of emotion is [also] spatially mediated...when we speak of the 'heights of joy' and the 'depths of despair', significant others are comfortingly *close* or distressingly *distant*'. However, in the case of the high-ropes course, emotion, specifically fear, is activated within the participants by the three-dimensional nature of the space. Fear plays a key role in the embodied experience of the high-ropes course, and is the means by which the body experiences and interprets interactions irrespective of whether those interactions are between people, or people and things. As Longhurst et al (2008:210) propose, '[e]motions are not just tied to the body...they are also bound up with wider structures and processes'. The construction of the ropes course and the various components that contribute to the experience—the trees, the height, the people, the equipment—all combine to produce an environment in which fear is stimulated. Strong emotion such as fear, according to Young (1996:93), 'looks at the past (memory of pain) and likewise to the future, to actions (fight or flight) that allow the organism to avoid pain, injury, and death', already evident in the reactions of the participants whilst anticipating the high-ropes course.

In *Police Beat*, Dennis discusses the ongoing academic and theoretical perspectives of emotions. Shifting from the mind/body or biological/social dichotomies of emotion, Dennis (2007:xiv) advocates Milton's 'middle ground of an ecological approach [where emotion] stands as located between individual and environment'. An ecological approach extends the study of emotion beyond the predominantly social nature of emotion and extends to include the 'many non-human things, some of which have very deep significance for us' (Milton 2005:203). This ecological approach is most valid in the context of the ropes course that, although the non-human aspects hold no long-term significance, for the duration of the exercise, it is anticipated that the participants emotionally interact with the environment and infrastructure. This specific space is

created for the participants to experience fear, the embodied emotion/feeling response, and their subsequent choice for action, and during the activity the participants will have a multi-sensorial experience *of* and *in* their bodies.

Undertaking the high-ropes course demands a significant shift in sense requirement of the participants as they negotiate this physically challenging space. Lund (2005:28, italics in original) proposes 'that the sense of touch needs to be approached in relation to *how* the body moves in different contexts'. As such, the ropes course of the rebirthing training places the body in an alternative space, expecting it to perform in a significantly different manner. Whilst touch is usually subordinated to the visual, and generally reduced to the tactile sensations, touch assumes a more dominant role in this exercise. The participants negotiating the ropes course are drawing on a deeper bodily somatics beyond that of cutaneous touch to a more complex system of sensation throughout the body, which Paterson (2009:768) describes as follows:

'touch' is not reducible to tactility or tactile sensation alone, and that immediate bodily experience combines other sensations distributed throughout the body, felt as muscular tensions, movements and balance, along with sensitivity to temperature and pain. All these sometimes uncomfortable tactile, muscular and balance sensations are indubitably present in a variety of embodied activities and contexts.

The sensory experiences of skin contact plus the 'internally felt bodily sensations' (ibid.:768), of 'feeling' the body in space and movement are collectively referred to as 'haptic' knowledge.

'Persons experience themselves simultaneously *in* and *as* their bodies. We all do this especially when we feel the reality of our presence in the world: emotion is central to an understanding of the agency of the embodied praxis' (Lyon & Barbalet 1994:54, italics in original). As such the emotions set in motion by the knowledge of a high-ropes course continue the next day as the participants respond to the emotions provoked, using their bodies in a new and challenging mode and engaging with the space via an ecological approach where 'human beings are sensually connected with place in ways that are not preventable, that are unstoppable, that are indivisible from environment' (Dennis 2007:xvi).

Furthermore, the participants are required to provide full support for each other. Whilst each participant is having their own subjective experience, the challenge also produces an intersubjectivity that is unavoidable due to the nature of the activity. The team below is inextricably linked to the one negotiating the element, literally through the rope and the environment, and energetically through the engagements required to achieve the activity. 'There is no marking of person and environment into two parts...each is far too deeply embedded in the other, too connected via sensual connections, to be undone' (ibid.:xvi-xvii). This nexus of space, emotion, and embodiment will be explored as the participants undertake the high-ropes course.

***The high-ropes course: feel the fear***

I bump into Lily at a coffee shop on the way to the ropes course on Saturday morning. She is agitated and expresses anger about the behaviour of several of the other participants. Lily then moves onto talking about how difficult it is for her to tell the truth at work. 'As a supervisor, I still have people not following protocol and I don't know how to tell them without upsetting them.' She just wants people to like her, which she recognises as a pattern left over from childhood. I reflect on the various fears she admitted to the night before; 'insecure about myself and my relationship with my husband', 'the dark and that prevents me from being powerful', 'not being accepted, lack of success and poverty'. Although Lily was excited about the day's activity the night before, her outpouring indicates alternative emotions—namely anger. Initially complaining about her perception of behaviours of other participants, she turns to her difficulty at speaking up at work and her need for people to like her.

Paul, Jonathon and Gaylene arrive together at the location of the high ropes. The three of them, in turn, relate their terror and the unsettled nights they have experienced. 'I have packed an extra change of pants and underpants,' says Jonathon. Robyn arrives with Margaret, quietly standing in the background whereas Simon heartily announces his arrival. 'Are we all ready?' he asks, laughing at the same time, which dispels a little of the tension in the group.

We are all assembled, readying to receive instruction from the two ropes-course instructors. I watch with interest at how the groups are formed. The participants are shuffling about. Paul, Jonathon and Gaylene, who travelled up together are huddled together; this group Simon gathers towards him when they are given instruction to form two groups. Left to form the second group, Robyn and Lily's partnership is boosted by the addition of two assistants, Sam and Kathy. The third assistant, Zoe, is assigned to Simon's group. They are taken through the pre-climbing protocol by Andy, the owner/operator of the business. At this time, they learn and practice how to safely rig up, how to belay<sup>43</sup> one another, and how to communicate clearly and effectively; Andy constantly reinforcing the importance of clear communication and impeccable belaying routines to ensure the safety of all, particularly the climber. They are then ready to start on the various climbing apparatus. Each group will be checked, guided, and supported by a trained professional.

Drawing on the experiential and emotional work I have done in the past, in particular my previous participation in the high-ropes course, enables me to analyse the experiences of this weekend more fully. Dewsbury and Naylor (2002:257) write that:

bodies are also agents that space and renegotiate the world through their convictions, emotional doubts and physical involvement, all of which speak of the sheer effort of doing research and being an academic. In this bodies are more than just a continuum of sensation, energy, force and memory; they are themselves the very means of negotiation in the way they enable us to array the field into a space of empirical action.

Having used my body to traverse the high ropes, I am able to recall the physical, sensual, and emotional stimuli and responses that the experience evoked for me. Reflecting on my own experience brings into focus the challenges faced by researchers whilst writing sensuous scholarship, whether I could adequately analyse the experiences of these participants if I myself had not undertaken the physical challenge of the ropes course myself. As it stands, being a participating assistant, I am able to relate to the participants in the trees, remembering and reflecting on my own bodily responses. I

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<sup>43</sup> The belayer is the person at the base of the climb who manages the rope as the climber ascends and descends. The belayer wears a harness with a belaying device attached. The climbing rope passes through this device and enables the belayer to monitor the safety of the climber through varying the amount of friction, hence speed, applied to the rope, from running freely to 'locked off'.

believe that if I had not experienced that embodied emotional, physical, and mental alternative space, I would have limited understanding of the experiences of the participants within my fieldwork. The very nature of this undertaking, within the confines of the rebirthing training, produces an embodied experience that would be most difficult to analyse without personal experience. As Paterson proposes, 'the haptic experience of others...is inescapably mediated through the haptic experience of the researcher' (2009:776). I am aware of my excitement as I observe the participants begin their experience.



Plate 2: Negotiating an element

The whole group watch the first climber, Paul, being guided by Andy. It is aspects of my personal experience that I draw on to watch Paul visibly demonstrate the range of experiences as he attends to this climb. Paul is pale and focussed. At times, as he climbs the ladder and then the foot-pegs, he halts and it is almost possible to observe the dialogue that is taking place in his head. With much encouragement from below, he negotiates the element and is finally back on the ground. As the group collectively celebrates his achievement, Paul wryly grins and announces, 'Shit that was one of the hardest things I've done for a long time, and one of the best. Thanks guys, I couldn't have done it without your support.' The two groups then split up and Robyn and Lily's group move to another element. Margaret and I wander between the two groups, she supporting, me observing and gathering my field notes.

Simon's group is slow to start. Having voiced clearly on the Birth and Conception weekend her life-long fear of heights, Gaylene raises her hand next, much to the surprise of her team mates. 'I thought you'd leave it till last', says Simon. 'I want to get it over and done with,' replies Gaylene. However, once her harness is on and the ropes tied and checked, Gaylene starts crying. 'I'm feeling overwhelmed', she admits to Margaret. Margaret replies, 'You can cope with it. Change your self-talk—you're saying you can't cope with it when in fact you actually are.' Simon chimes in, 'Come on Gaylene, we're all here for you.' Simon, as belayer, has taken on the role of chief supporter. Gaylene, after some coaching, prepares to scale the ladder. She freezes on the third step. 'I can't move'. Simon, with calm authoritative assurance in his voice coaches her; 'One step at a time'. Margaret adds, 'Keep moving'. Slowly, Gaylene inches her way up the ladder, her body pressed so closely into the rungs that the action of her legs and arms is hampered. Surprisingly, once she reaches the foot pegs, Gaylene scales the rest of the climb relatively quickly. She reaches the top and manages to scramble onto the joint of the wire where it is looped around the tree—the starting point of the element. 'Breathe', 'relax your body,' 'rest for a while' are suggestions floating up to Gaylene from those below. From ten metres below, Gaylene's emotional and physical stress is evident in her face and body. Her jaw is clamped; tension is evident throughout her physicality, her torso pressed up against the tree trunk, her breathing so shallow that it is almost imperceptible.

'Tell us when you're ready to start moving.' She gives the cue and starts her walk across the trembling wire, holding onto the rope in each hand. There is a visible shift in her body part way across when she suddenly starts moving faster and with much greater assurance. Gaylene reaches, hugs the tree on the other side and bursts out laughing. Eventually she inches back into the centre of the element to be lowered to the ground. After celebrating with all her team mates, Gaylene cries 'I'm fantastic' with a grin from ear to ear. She thanks Simon for his belaying and coaching.

*It was absolutely fantastic having you tell me where to put my feet and hands each time. Up there on the wire I had fear in my stomach and jittering in my muscles. And even though I have a fear of heights I made myself look down and it wasn't that high. I had the realisation halfway across—'now life, here I come'. Now I feel light, as in the body, and air-headed. I feel fantastic.*

I leave Gaylene's group to see what is happening with the second team. I watch Robyn and Lily handle the elements easily. As Robyn stated the night before, she has already done this course. However, this ease changes at one particular element consisting of a series of variably spaced hanging ropes called the Vines. The climber holds onto these hanging ropes, progressing from one rope to the next as they walk along a single wire. Robyn is frozen in the middle. She has reached the point where she cannot grab the next hanging rope until she physically lets go of the previous one. Robyn's reach is simply not long enough. She is confronted with the fear of letting go of the rope and taking the next step without the security of holding onto a rope.

Margaret calls out to Robyn: 'You can't control this, you need to let go.' Her team members provide her with ongoing support, both through the physical steps required and emotional support. Following is a brief excerpt of how that support plays out as her team intermittently make suggestions.

*Lily: Let go, let it all go, let go of control. Ok stretch out your left arm.*

*Robyn: No.*

*Lily: And you need to be breathing.*

*Margaret: You can't control it. Look where you want to go, stay focussed on that.*

*Lily: Balance and focus, no point holding with your right hand.*

*Margaret: Now let go of the past.*

*Sam: Keep looking forward, to the next rope.*

Robyn's body is visible from our position on the ground. She wobbles above the standing rope, clinging to the vertical rope with both hands, her head downcast. Suddenly her body and demeanour shifts to alert attentiveness to the task ahead, preparing for her attempt to reach the next rope. Robyn's attention is on the next rope; she stretches out for it, but her attempt is ineffective. Robyn retreats back into her original wobbly, clinging position. At times, it seems as though Robyn is oblivious of the encouragement from below; she appears to not hear commands; she does not reply at times. It is like she retreats into an impenetrable internal state.



Plate 3: The Vines

In the pauses between the various suggestions offered through this exchange, Robyn makes several attempts to reach the next rope. However her inability to let go of the previous rope means she is unsuccessful. Lily persists.

*I want you to get the tension out of your legs. You're still flustered. It's about being relaxed, picking a point, could be something parallel to you, and strong, relaxed and breathing. Breathe in the breeze. See how stable you are, that's what you need to do. Start to get grounded again.*

*Robyn: Yes. I'm up here but I can't do it.*

*Lily: Are you going to say 'I'm safe?'*

Robyn shouts out, frustration is evident in her voice and a wave of tension runs through her body.

*Robyn: I'M SAFE I'M SAFE I'M SAFE.*

*Lily: Breathing, relaxed.*

*Robyn: I won't be able to reach it.*

*Margaret: What do you have to do to reach it?*

There is no reply. At this point Robyn has been stuck in the same place for about twenty minutes. She is showing signs of tiring; increased wobbling on the wire, head downcast, sagging in her body. Robyn's team patiently continue to give her instructions although

she doesn't follow them and, at times, doesn't appear to be listening to them. 'I can't' and 'there's nothing there' are the two expressions that she repeatedly uses.

Robyn then makes a major move and somehow she turns around on the wire. She hasn't achieved her goal of reaching the next rope. Thirty minutes have passed since Robyn first froze at this point along the element. Lily tries a new strategy by being more provocative.

*Lily: Let's stop crapping about and move on. Are you going to let go of the rope?*

*Robyn: It's absurd.*

*Lily: It's absurd, of course it is. If you want to be different, reach out for the future. Let go and move forward.*

*Margaret: You're nearly there. It's symbolic Robyn.*

*Robyn: I know.*

*Lily: Well then let go and go into the unknown.*

*Robyn: My hands are in the wrong place. I don't want to miss it.*

*Margaret: Make a mistake. Take a risk. It doesn't matter.*

*Robyn: It matters.*

*Lily: To whom?*

*Robyn: To me.*

*Lily: Mistakes have already happened—do it again.*

Then suddenly, Robyn lets go of the rope, steps forward and grabs the next rope. The team are so excited; they jump up and down, cheering, and with a sigh of relief a collective relaxation of their bodies takes place. It has been an intense physical and emotional episode for them to support Robyn to this point—as if they had, as one whole, embodied Robyn's tension. Lily calls out to Robyn.

*Lily: You did it.*

*Robyn: No I didn't—it was the wrong hand.*

*Margaret: How about letting yourself win Robyn.*

*Robyn: But I didn't.*

After a few more attempts to move to the other side of the element, Robyn admits to fatigue and the team lower her to the ground.

By this time, the other group has arrived and they collectively move over to the final element: the Leap of Faith. To achieve this, the actor wears a completely different harness with the safety ropes attached at the back, out of eye sight and reach. A person is required to climb up onto a platform about ten metres above ground and leap out to grab a trapeze. The premise is the lack of evidence of the safety apparatus requires the jumper to overcome even greater levels of fear to jump out into the void, hence its name. It was this element that proved the testing ground for Lily.



Plate 4: Climbing up to the Leap of Faith

Once again, Lily has no difficulty climbing up the tree for this particular element. I watch Lily as she stands on the platform. She steps toward its edge, hesitates and steps back again. Tension is visible in her body and face. Lily looks down at the ground, then up to

the trapeze, a look of intense concentration on her face. She repeats the stepping forward and back sequence several more times, palpably agitated, before she takes the leap. As she stretches out toward the trapeze, she lets out a shrill shriek. She misses and is lowered to the ground. As Lily's feet hit dirt, her legs crumble and she sits down. It takes her a few minutes before she looks up, a huge grin on her face and she is able to detach herself from the harness. Later I ask her what was happening for her on the platform.

*I was fine climbing up but once I got on that platform, the fear kicked in. I realised that I had control over the other things I did whereas that 'Leap of Faith'—there was nothing. In my head I'm saying 'just do' it to myself. However each time I stepped up to the edge of the platform, the fear would wave through my body and my body spoke to me 'don't do it'. It was like two different dimensions of who I am conversing. Eventually I just had to jump.*



Plate 5: Leaping off

### **Embodiment of Fear and its Impact on Agency**

These three quite distinct experiences of the ropes course once again demonstrate the individualised experiences of embodied fear and its impact on agency. Each of these participants honestly reveals their greatest fears after being informed of the high-ropes course. Gaylene, with support from her team mates is able to negotiate her element with an ease which surprises her considering her fears, particularly her fear of heights. Robyn

demonstrates her lack of trust—primarily self-trust which she identifies as ‘one of my issues’ and resists much of the support offered to her by her team. Lily’s attempt at the Leap of Faith requires an internal focus, a more individualised performance which challenges her fear of ‘the dark [which] prevents me from being powerful’. At the high-ropes course, Gaylene negotiates the element connecting to and drawing support from her team. Despite ‘feeling overwhelmed’ she follows the careful guidance of Simon to override her emotions. Gaylene’s embodiment of the task and her spatial connection to the elements and the team supporting her below demonstrate an:

unboundedness of the bodily being in sensual terms...the senses reach out from the...stable site of the body to engage with place, person, world, thing. This general principle forms the foundation for the specific ways in which individual bodies reach out from their ‘bounds’ to become unbounded and to form the social body. (Dennis 2007:54)

Gaylene’s embodied experience extends beyond the corporeal body through her engagement with her team mates, taking time to sensorially experience her surroundings: to feel the trees, to see where she is situated. Furthermore, the bodies of the support team are also unbounded, the group intimately fused into a single unit through their shared emotional and sensorial engagement. For a deeper analysis of the high-ropes activity, I shall draw on their reflections on the Sunday.

The following day, Gaylene reflects on the realisations she had during that first walk of the day. Gaylene recognises how she stops in ‘the face of adversity’. Using the support of her team, overriding her fear whilst climbing the ladder, and recalling Margaret’s words ‘repeated acts of courage,’ all contribute to her embodied experience of the ropes course. Gaylene reports:

*I was surprised—I was really surprised with myself. The feelings I thought I was going to have I didn’t once I got going and stayed focussed on the goal and forgot all the emotional stuff. It wasn’t nearly as scary as I thought it would be. But my body—I was most surprised because I didn’t think would be able to do it.*

For Gaylene to effectively traverse the elements of the high ropes course necessitates a fully embodied experience. Whilst Gaylene draws on the support of her team and focussed on her goal, the emotions she anticipated recede from her awareness. The sensations of ‘feel[ing] light, as in the body....feel[ing] fantastic’ stand in stark contrast to

the overwhelming emotions Gaylene experienced prior to climbing. That her body performs in an unexpected way further contribute to her surprise. This multi-faceted, multi-sensorial experience is summarised by Paterson (2009:777) who describes:

our embodied...stance not as the separation of mind from body, head from feet, but as diverse strands of sense returns from limbs, viscera, sense organs and muscular moment that variously combine as an almost elastic sensory-spatial envelope.

Whilst Gaylene's excitement is palpable, Robyn's reaction is more muted. She talks about her experience the previous day.

*I tended to watch other people on the ropes and work through in my head how to do each element and know that there is no risk. I don't have any fear of heights so that wasn't a problem. The problem came when I had to let go of that rope on the Vines. It was too great a risk for me and that's when the fear stepped in. My body went stiff, I was frozen, I couldn't move. My mind went numb with fear. My fear is that I can't do it. My arms are not long enough. I could see and hear the people on the ground but I blocked them out. It was a huge risk for me: I had nothing to hold onto in the future. I had to conquer the fear in my head by gradually talking myself into it. Eventually I could psych myself into taking the next step and then I listened to the people below.*

Reflecting on Robyn's experience of the previous day, until this particular element, Robyn had managed the ropes course easily. However, this element requires Robyn to let go of the previous rope to enable her to reach the next rope, for a brief moment her only support being the wobbly wire on which she is balancing. The added support provided by the harness Robyn is wearing, the belaying equipment, and the team appear to vanish from her awareness. Emotionally Robyn is in a state of fear. Intellectually, Robyn is aware of the perceived risk, her lack of control, and her fear of failure, which she admits to preventing her from moving. Robyn listens to her team mates intermittently, reflected in moments when she is socially connected and, other times, disconnected. Rather than 'reflexively learning through the bodily sensations and responses that occur inevitably as part of the embodied experiences...within different spatial contexts' (Paterson 2009:767), Robyn remains frozen on the wire; she describes her embodied experience—her frozen body, her mind numb with fear. Robyn intellectualises her bodily strategies and after repeated attempts she achieved the goal. Yet despite physically achieving the goal, Robyn negates her success because she used

'the wrong hand'. The achievement of her body does not match the mental 'map' of success that she has constructed. In a later interview Robyn shares with me.

*One of the things I learnt is I get cross with myself if I don't do it right. I set a benchmark and it's high. Then I beat myself up if I don't get there. I hesitate and then the head talk kicks in. For me it's about letting go, it's not necessarily the risk. It's more about not holding onto past, things that I know are solid.*

In comparison to Gaylene, Robyn does not experience the unbounded connection with her support team. And yet her team appears to have a strong connection with her, evident in the collective relaxation when Robyn successfully made the move to the next hanging rope.

Lily has yet a different experience on the Leap of Faith. This element differs from the other elements in that a team is not required to belay the player. In comparison to the previous elements with the possibility of the team playing an instrumental role, the Leap of Faith becomes a solitary activity requiring the individual to draw on their own internal agency. Lily's spatial awareness is reduced to her bodily position and the trapeze. Lily recalls her embodied experience whilst standing on the platform: the waves of fear, her head advising her to jump, and her body telling her otherwise. Lily relates: 'You stand there and your head says jump but you won't do it. It reacts differently—it's like your head and your body are fighting each other. You want to but everything in your body is saying 'you don't jump off a ledge'. At first glance, Lily's experience reflects 'cultural concepts of *mind* and *body*' (Martin 2000:570, italics in original), a dualism 'related to other conceptual oppositions in Western epistemology, such as those between nature and culture, passion and reason, individual and society' (Scheper Hughes & Lock 1987:10). However, Lily reports both her brain and her body speaking to her, suggesting that the mind is embodied, and in this way reflects Dennis' (2007:33) proposal that:

Merleau-Ponty's elimination of the boundary between mind and body comes into its own, for within his work, the body can be understood as the grounds of all perception and can include within its bounds such a thing as 'the mind'.

The fluidity and flexibility of the 'boundary between mind and body' is evident in the experiences of these three women, and attest to the multi-focal, multi-dimensional, multi-sensorial and distinctly individualised embodied experience of fear. Each woman is

challenged by different elements of the ropes course. Both Robyn and Lily demonstrate how fear, manifested through a need for control in both women, temporarily constrains their agency. The 'will to control as [a] block' (Johnston & Barcan 2006:26) to action is reflected in the experiences of Lily and Robyn on the high ropes. Gaylene maintains contact with her support team and uses their encouragement to keep going in contrast to Robyn and Lily who incline to self-reliance. Robyn attempts to calculate intellectually, whilst Lily experiences an internal embodied dialogue in order to achieve their goals. A spiritual connection to her environment is revealed by Robyn in a later interview: 'the sensation of the trees and leaves and the thrill which runs through my body, from head to toe; I find it exhilarating. It's an intellectual thing for me; then my body follows.'

Once the participants have recounted their experiences, Margaret clarifies the purpose of the fear weekend for the participants.

*This weekend really can be the changing point. Yesterday essentially was a big game and you see the true personalities come out in everybody and it's just amazing. Then being able to transform some of those elements of those personalities into something really useful makes a huge change in your life. And cellularly, it makes a difference because something has shifted in your body. Now the challenge is to be able to say 'okay I've had that experience. I've seen what I'm capable of, I've seen my ability and now I need to transfer this into my daily life'. Become aware of what you've been doing and don't rip yourself off.*

Gaylene, Lily and Robyn reflect on the subsequent impact of the high-ropes course during the mid-month evening. Gaylene reports:

*I'm a lot clearer in my mind and I've been challenging myself a bit more; like walking the dog and going into an appointment on my own. I walked across a glass walkway that I've always been terrified of—I was still scared but I was much freer in my movement. I'm going to give myself small challenges to keep going.*

Using the support of her team, immersing herself in the environment and continuing to move, may suggest that Gaylene had appeared to relinquish the need to control and was prepared to 'go with the flow' that is now reflected in her willingness to undertake challenges in her daily life. Johnston and Barcan (2006:26) expose the seemingly contradictory messages emanating from New Age/alternative sources. On one hand, individuals have authority and are developing ways to construct and control their lives and, on the other hand, are encouraged to relinquish control by "going with the flow"

and...trusting the processes of life, seeing the will to control as more likely to block rather than bring about transformation'.

Lily is sitting on the edge of her chair, the embodiment of excitement. She identifies how she intends incorporating her realisations from the activity into her future life.

*I learnt that it's literally about taking risks and trusting that it does work out even if I can't control it. So I'm going to take more risks knowing that I don't have full control. Previously I've done jobs where I know I can do it 100% with very little learning involved, and that's the way I've always done life. I love my comfort zone; I was comfortable with the ropes stuff; I could hold onto something but that Leap of Faith—I couldn't hold onto anything; I couldn't control it.*

Lily clearly identifies her tendency to not take risks and wanting to be in full control. Her experience of the Leap of Faith gave her an embodied experience that enables her to understand the limitations of that control; and to choose to take more risks.

*I did get a lot out of the fear weekend and it's sort of integrating and I'm practicing all that stuff. I'm speaking up more at work than I have before and I think I'm scaring a few people. I'm not worrying about what people think so that's interesting.*

However, Robyn has a different experience. Whilst Lily and Gaylene have articulated and put into practice their realisations, Robyn reports:

*I feel like I'm in a no-win situation; like I'm not making progress. I feel like it's all too hard and I can't see any pathways to do anything differently. I have pain in the lower part of my body and I've just been in my head since the trees. I understand I need to do things differently but I don't see how yet.*

In a later interview, Robyn relates how she observes and assesses the risk of an activity. 'Once I rationalise that it is safe, I love the thrill where I feel free, relaxed and happy; at one with nature'. Robyn's challenge remains that within her own life any changes that she anticipates making contain a risk that she is unable to rationalise. The fear of that change may be seen to reflect the frozen state she experienced on the ropes course. The transformation that she is seeking has yet to materialise.

Each participant embodied the ropes course individually, and their embodiment has provided them with an experience where the emotion of fear is activated; this fear then

influences their sensorial embodied practice and their intellectual engagement. By undertaking the high-ropes course, the participants have had:

embodied experiences of touching and feeling, conjunctions of sensation and emotion that cannot arise without the physicality of the body...forms of touching irreducible to mere skin contact, that involve feeling the body in movement and action. (Paterson 2009:766)

Their ability to incorporate the experience of the ropes course into their daily lives is as individual as their embodiment. As Lyon & Barbalet (1994:54) propose, '[t]he human capacity for social agency, to collectively and individually contribute to the making of the social world, comes precisely from the person's lived experience of embodiment'.

## **Conclusion**

For the first four weekends of the rebirthing training, Margaret constructed and maintained a safe space for the participants to build trust and honesty. The topic of the fifth weekend was fear and Margaret inverted the safe space by taking the participants on a high-ropes course. The impact of this changed space on individuals' emotions in turn influenced their embodied experiences, as well as their relationship with the environment and each other.

As Margaret pointed out, the 'fear weekend is not necessarily about fear itself, but how you play the game'. For the participants, the game was one of personal responsibility; they were responsible for recognising, managing and moving through the fear generated by the high-ropes course. Accepting personal responsibility included telling the truth about their personal fears on the Friday night of the training. On Saturday they were carefully briefed and instructed on safety for themselves and each other prior to starting the high-ropes course. Margaret reminded them that 'if you don't take responsibility, people could hurt themselves'. Prior to the ropes course, Margaret had reinforced the responsibility of each participant to maintain safety for their fellows, building and maintaining trust. As the day unfolded, Margaret constantly reminded the participants of their responsibility for their experience of the high-ropes course.

By taking the participants through a high-ropes course, Margaret generated an embodied experience of fear. This process facilitated identification of and then challenging beliefs and behaviours that participants employ to combat fear in their lives. Gaylene drew on the support of her team to challenge her fear of heights and incorporate her experience into her daily life. Lily recognised the futility of trying to stay in her comfort zone, and that in the future she will choose to take more risks. Robyn found the process of 'letting go' whilst negotiating the Vines element excruciatingly difficult. When she did finally let go, Robyn negated her achievement. From her own account, Robyn's challenge continued as she reported, 'I understand I need to do things differently but I don't see how yet'. For Lily and Robyn, the conflict between control and surrender or 'going with the flow' (Johnston & Barcan 2006:26) became evident in their embodied experiences of the high-ropes course. Whilst Lily decided to relinquish control, Robyn was yet to find the means for her to move forward. Rebirthing discourse about control and surrender is summarised in Sky's (1990:124) reflections:

Ultimately, a healthy, balanced, and creative life is comprised of equal parts of will and surrender, we are the doer, exerting our personal will, and life is done magically through us, the more we let go. We create the world and we surrender to its creations. We are going with the flow down life's river and we have the paddle of personal will to steer the way.

The fear weekend marked the shift from childhood to adulthood within the rebirthing training, and focussed on personal responsibility. The training, as a prolonged temporal process of change and transformation, is gradually unfolding as the participants continue to negotiate and respond to the challenges presented. Over the next two weekends of the rebirthing training, responsibility within the adult sphere is reflected by a person's management of money and relationships—the focus of Chapter Seven.

## 7

### **Money & Relationships: responsibility**

Spiritual partnership is based upon equality, balance between the male and female energies, the freedom and the strength to be one's self while taking responsibility for one's actions, sexuality, open and truthful communication without fear of ridicule, honoring and respecting the other's strengths and weaknesses, and the genuine recognition that your partner is truly your most intimate and all-embracing friend. (Fisher 2012)<sup>44</sup>

#### **Introduction**

Within every cultural context there comes a time when an individual moves from childhood into adulthood. This may take form in formalised rites of passage where the transition is clearly defined by a range of practices within a certain timeframe. The individual enters the liminal state as a child and emerges from the rite of passage an adult; a format well documented in the studies of indigenous cultures (Markstrom & Iborra 2003:399; Townsend 1995:165; Wane 2000:60). Within contemporary Australia, this transition is not usually formally ritualised and the slow transition into adulthood follows a fluid and flexible mode based on, amongst other things, increasing levels of personal responsibilities. Most commonly, though not confined to, a person may choose between job-seeking and further education on leaving school. The expectation is that, with work and/or study, individuals take on increasing financial independence. Concurrently, seeking intimate relationships outside the immediate family is a second expectation for maturing young people. Amongst the various ways within Australian society that adulthood may be demonstrated, financial independence and the creation of an intimate relationship are two characteristics on which rebirthing focuses.

The Fear weekend is posited as the turning point of the rebirthing training process. The sixth and seventh weekends (Money, and Sexuality and Relationships, respectively) are considered to provide the opportunity for the participants to explore their own journeys

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<sup>44</sup> Rennie Fisher: Self-healing advocate, artist and blogger

through these adult indicators. Within the rebirthing model, a measure of adulthood is the degree of personal responsibility that an individual takes for their own life. Margaret (Trainers Manual, Unit Six:1) writes, 'the Money and Relationships modules represent maturity in the development of a human being and therefore are placed after the Education and Fear weekends which represent the adolescent years of development'. Responsibility emerges as a key theme for adulthood—the responsibility for money and relationships. Leonard & Laut (1983:209) propose that '[i]f your conscious mind does not see how it created something, then that means that some part of your unconscious mind created it'. The training and rebirthing process provide the means of putting 'your conscious mind in contact with the causative part of your unconscious mind'. The final step to this process is integration which, in the rebirthing model, 'facilitates your ability to cause change' (ibid.:209). It is through this process that the two determinants of adulthood—financial responsibility and relationships—can be consciously negotiated by the integration of past knowledge and experience, thus providing informed choices for the future.

The expectation is that the participants, as they move through these two modules, will reflexively draw on their experiences of the previous five modules. In doing so, they may utilise their new understandings and awareness of their own behaviour to reflect on their experiences of adulthood. Within the rebirthing framework, rather than blaming circumstances and other people, adulthood is measured by the degree of personal responsibility an individual assumes. This entails making new and informed choices and undertaking the necessary changes—an increase in agency. What will become evident through this chapter is the significance of the choices various participants make, and the resultant changes that are wrought within their lives. We follow, in particular, the journeys of Simon, Robyn and Paul. This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section will explore the participants' relationship with money followed by delving into personal intimate relationships in the second section. The final section will include analysis of the warm water rebirth, which is traditionally held on the Sunday of the relationships weekend.

## Money: negotiating the adult world

Money, according to Maurer (2006:16), 'provides a universal yardstick against which to measure and evaluate the universe of objects, relations, services, and persons'. Money is intrinsic to the Australian lifestyle; food, shelter, clothing and other goods are acquired legally through the exchange of money. The ability to earn money provides the opportunity for choice—to save and/or spend it. As Gilbert (2005:361, italics in original) suggests, money is 'a symbolic referent, a social system, *and* a material practice...a metaphor of modern society and a material object rooted in daily practices'. How is money earned? How is it spent—by whom? What meanings can be attached to the circulation of money? These are just a few questions that attest to the social nature of money—money as a 'contemporary signifier' (ibid.:366). From a rebirthing perspective, money, and financial viability, is seen as a metaphor for assuming adult responsibility. This section of Chapter Seven will explore the experiences of the rebirthing cohort as they undergo the Money weekend of the rebirthing training.

Having missed the mid-month session because he was at the 'pub', Simon is surly and grumpy when he arrives on the Friday night. It is evident from his demeanour and the smell of alcohol on his breath that he had been drinking prior to arriving. Margaret introduces the Money weekend.

*From now on, the training will let you see how you are negotiating the adult world, particularly in relation to your childhood. This is best reflected with how you handle your money and your relationships, two of the biggest problems in our world. And for most of us, our parents haven't taught us about either. But they're two of the most fundamental living things that you need to be able to handle.*

The participants begin their 'shares'.

*Jonathon: I've had this massage/reiki business thing off and on but the money thing, I've never had enough self esteem to do that stuff. For years I've struggled with this credit card debt and I thought, 'there's no way I'm going into this weekend with a credit card debt hanging over my head', so I pulled a huge chunk of money out of my savings today and paid off my credit card. And that feels really good.*

Simon is next. He has been brooding in his chair and his surly demeanour sits in direct contrast to the supportive command he demonstrated at the ropes course.

## 7 Money and Relationships: responsibility

*My visa got shut down. I didn't want it to happen until I'd spent all the money on it. I thought about money but fuck, it went from me man. I had no income whatsoever. I tried really hard to get on the dole but just couldn't seem to make it to appointments. Then I couldn't buy gear for this other job I had. At home I had the mobile phone and internet but no power, no food and no petrol. I couldn't get off the property and I didn't want to be there. I got a little bit of kindling and made a fire to cook my chickens' eggs. It's great to have all these great realisations about myself but if I'm sitting in the gutter at the end of nine months because I've got no money, I don't know how much that's helping me.*

It is evident from his story that Simon is currently overwhelmed by his poor financial situation.

*Gaylene: I went to a garage sale and they had 'Rich Dad Poor Dad'<sup>45</sup> out for fifty cents so I got that. I went to a seminar a few years ago on real estate investing and, low and behold, in the mail I get two free tickets to a seminar this lady's running for free. I thought 'wow, this is just amazing'.*

*Paul: I made the decision a month ago that I'm not going back to my old job. About a week later I get a letter saying they're going to give me, like a hundred thousand dollars to go away. I feel like it's falling into my lap.*

*Robyn: It's been a bit of a rollercoaster these last weeks. I made a decision to go away for two weeks so I booked it and that's a bit scary because I don't like travelling on my own. I came to the conclusion that I'm not going to try and rationalise everything, so I've gradually felt more comfortable with where I'm heading. Also I'm being more confident and meaningful in my interactions with my partner and he's responding much better.*

These short excerpts provide a small window into the variety of issues experienced around money and capacities for financial responsibility. Simon has ongoing money problems, which could be viewed as a lack of financial responsibility. Both Jonathon and Paul are having alternative, albeit different, experiences. Jonathon has chosen to take responsibility for his credit card debt by paying it off, whereas Paul is anticipating a windfall of money in the form of a payout after a long career in the education department. His payout will enable him to 'catch up with some people. I'm no longer a hermit in the garden anymore'. His relationship with himself and the people in his life is changing. Gaylene professes to be 'amazed' by the apparent coincidences of locating a cheap book about money and receiving free tickets for a seminar on investing. In contrast, Robyn shifts the focus from money to her relationship with her husband. Lily, in her reflections below, also links money issues with her primary relationship. Lily's account

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<sup>45</sup> Authored by Robert Kiyosaki, *Rich Dad Poor Dad* provides advice for increasing one's financial intelligence and financial independence.

attests to a strong link between money and relationships in adulthood; a close relationship that will unfold through this chapter.

*Lily: Money stuff is coming up especially with my husband because he is one of those people who'd get loan after loan because he wants this now. I am trying to train him into 'you don't need this right now.' We're living from fortnight to fortnight and it's just getting really fucking frustrating. I'm different in the sense of after the fear weekend I've been practicing just saying what I think. But it still affects me when I tell the truth and I'm so worried that I'm going to upset people. (Lily is upset and teary.)*

*Margaret: So what do you want to say? (Lily takes a deep breath.)*

*Lily: For starters I want my husband to take responsibility. I'm working two jobs and he says he appreciates it but he still wants to go out and have all this stuff. (She takes another deep breath.) And normally I'm okay with my buddy stuff but I feel really hurt that you (addressing Simon) didn't even try and call me once. It would have been nice to have a call or a text message or something. (Lily takes some deep breaths and mops her eyes.)*

*Simon: After I didn't come midweek you rang me and gave me the feeling you were really upset with me. Then my phone got cut off and I haven't been ringing anybody. I did think you'd call me when you wanted to speak to me.*

*Lily: I did call you. I left messages. The last one I got to the point when I said 'just call me' and that was it.*

*Margaret: And what did you feel like saying?*

*Lily: I probably should have got a bit clearer about what I needed so I could get that message across to Simon. It was a major ARC break<sup>46</sup>. And it's same with David. At this point we do have an ARC break and we need to work it out.*

What starts out for Lily as issues with money and communication with her husband turns into a confrontation with Simon about his lack of commitment and connection as her phone buddy. Whilst Lily has been responding to the challenge of speaking up, Simon has not responded to her communications and she is then impelled to confront him with how she feels about this situation. Lily is attempting to take greater responsibility for her actions in contrast to Simon who, by deflecting his role, appears to take no responsibility for his relationship with Lily, which may be seen to mirror his money issues. At this time, Simon does not react any further, however later in this chapter, his response is stronger.

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<sup>46</sup> The ARCU or ARC triangle is a tool used within the training to demonstrate the source of grief. (See pages 55-56.) One contributing factor to an ARC break is a breakdown in communication.

The choices various participants have verbalised making are effecting change in varying degrees. From Simon's account, his choices result in a continual struggle with his finances—regretting the missed opportunity to spend all the money on his visa card before it was shut down. As Leonard & Laut propose (1983:208), '[y]ou cannot change anything effectively without taking responsibility for it being the way it already is, for your preference that it be different, and for the process of changing it'. Thus, from a rebirthing perspective, to be responsible as an adult, a person needs to recognise the position they are in, and then take responsibility for the choices and changes they make. In Simon's accounts, this responsibility seems to be lacking.

Margaret introduces money in this way.

*People spend money to relieve pain. Why do we invest? We invest so that we know we've got some money down the track so that it's not painful when we get older. The question needs to be asked, 'is it a need or a want?' Money is such a heavy subject because it really comes down to your life and your life-force—it is really about your survival on this planet and doing it to the greatest of your ability. So when we start to talk about money, all sorts of issues will come up. Can I make enough to give myself the sort of life that I really want? What is that anyway? What is my purpose? Fear and scarcity, which usually comes from your parents, are strong when you start to think about money.*

The rebirthing position around money is contained within the notion of 'prosperity consciousness'. Margaret writes:

Prosperity consciousness is the awareness that there is an innate ability in every human being to provide fully and abundantly for him or herself. This capacity to provide for themselves will be in alignment with the person's ability to understand the laws of supply and demand and the spiritual aspects of work, effort and reward or exchange (Participant Manual, Unit Six: 4).

A range of material informs the rebirthing view from its inception by Orr & Ray (1977:196). 'All human wealth is created by the human mind...The most important attribute you can bring to the creation of your own personal wealth is a well-developed prosperity consciousness'. Laut (1989:2) describes 'prosperity consciousness' as 'the ability to function effortlessly and conveniently in the physical world, having money or not, [and that] negative ideas about survival and dependency are the ones that tend to hold money problems in place'. As Laut then suggests, when money has not been mastered, there is a 'tendency to worry about it constantly'. Whilst 'prosperity

consciousness' infers financial prosperity, within modalities such as rebirthing, an individual with an active 'prosperity consciousness' creates prosperity in other areas of their lives and vice versa. As such money and relationships are seen to form a symbiotic relationship. It is through a strong emotionally supportive relationship with the self and the mindset to provide for oneself that an individual is able to participate healthily within a relationship with another. Effective money management is understood to be one indicator of independence and emotional wellbeing.

Margaret continues framing money within the rebirthing context.

*The concept that 'thought creates reality' is no more obvious than when a client presents for rebirthing with issues of scarcity: 'I can't get a job' and 'there's no money'. It often comes from the first time they were put to the breast and there wasn't enough milk and they think 'there's not enough for me'. And money, because it is energy, responds 100% to the energy that you put out. For example, with Simon getting his power cut off it's obvious that he hasn't got enough energy coming in, and that's because he hasn't been working. So energy in equals energy out. You cannot sit in a corner and be 100% capable of doing something and not do it. The universe just won't support you to do that. It's not a spiritual place to be because it's like you're ripping yourself off and ripping the world off for the talents you've got to offer. So you've got to do what you're best at, and that's how you then contribute to the world.*

Embedded in Margaret's discourse is a connection to the Buddhist notion of karma—the scientific principle of cause and effect, or action, on the immaterial plane, [or in this case the material plane], decreasingly irrevocably that one will reap what one has sown, both good and evil' (Jatava 2007:265). Secondly, Margaret draws on the concept of all things being composed of the same material, energy, as introduced through the energy body schema in Chapter Three. Not only is the body made of energy, all things in the universe are made of the same energy. Hence in the context of rebirthing, though money is concretely physical in nature, it is also seen as a form of energy and its acquisition is through the expansion of energy. 'Thought creates reality,' 'money as energy' and the law of karma are all interconnected and intertwined by Margaret to demonstrate how Simon compromises his ability to expend energy on working and earning resulting in his current financial predicament.

Margaret invites the participants to reflect and share the effects of their parents' attitudes to money. From the rebirthing perspective, the parental attitudes are a key influence on the individual's approach to, and management of, money—of 'prosperity consciousness'.

*Paul: Both my parents came from backgrounds of quite acute poverty. My dad was a big risktaker so he did quite well and he was incredibly generous; like he was always bailing family members out. My partner came from a very working class family where you got a weekly income and you lived to that so his ability to take risks financially is very small. So the money that we've made and the risks that we've taken with money that have paid off have been with me driving it.*

*Simon: My dad was also quite a risktaker early on in his life and he got rewarded quite well for it. I think he had a few blowouts in the '80s and after that he got too careful and I used to say to him 'oh fuck man just do something, stop sitting around, thinking about it'. But on the other side, mum had an unchecked cheque book. She was pretty frivolous with it and spoil me a lot.*

*Gaylene: I grew up with the message that the only way to get money is to work hard at school get a good job and then get the money. If you had leftover you could invest it. My parents never taught me budgeting or anything really to do with money or how money can make money.*

*Lily: I've carried through most of my money stuff from when I was a child. I was just taught to save, save, save, invest, that sort of stuff, mainly from my father. I started my first shares when I was nineteen. Now we've got two properties. It's definitely from my father; very sensible stuff like 'if you can't afford it you don't buy it'.*

*Jonathon: My parents were both conservative they weren't real risktakers. I've had enough money to be comfortable but that's been it. I've thought 'yes it'd be nice to have more so I could be comfortable and not worry about just being on the edge'. But I really haven't known how to do it.*

*Robyn: My parents were typical working class. They never really taught me about money. Money wasn't talked about. I know they fought about it a lot because Dad was more of a spend person and Mum wasn't, and she had to pick up the pieces. I think I learnt to 'always to live within your means'.*

It is evident in these accounts the influence of parental values to money. All candidates are able to articulate the impact of their particular family approach to money. Three dominant themes emerge from these accounts. Firstly, risk-taking is demonstrated by the fathers of Paul and Simon. The second position is that of financial conservatism as expressed by Jonathon, Lily and Gaylene. The 'only way to get money is to work hard'; 'learn[ing] to live within your means'; '[i]f you have any leftover you could invest it'; 'if you can't afford it you don't buy it'. Simon's father retreats to this position after financial difficulties in the '80s. The theme of irresponsibility with money emerges as a third

stance. Simon's mother was 'pretty frivolous' and 'spoilt [him] a lot'. Robyn's father 'was more of a spend person' and her mother had to manage with what was left. Robyn's choice was to follow her mother's lead and practiced to 'live within [her] means'. The issue for risk-takers is the outcome of that risk. Paul's father was financially successful and amply capable of supporting an extended family. In contrast Simon's father reverted to a more conservative mode when the risk didn't pay off, though Simon made the observation that his father never controlled the spending of his mother.

Whilst most of the participants practiced their dominant family principles, Robyn made the choice to follow her mother's lead in managing money. Gaylene is in the process of educating herself about money; Jonathon is choosing to pay his debts; Lily is learning to challenge her husband's approach to money. Paul is aware of the influence of his father's risktaking, electing to follow his father's lead has resulted in similar financial success for himself. Of all the participants, Simon demonstrates having significant difficulty around money. It is only through reflection on their parents' attitudes that the participants are able to make distinctions around their own choices in relationship to money.

Saturday morning Simon returns and once again, is angry and brooding. He returns to the previous evening's confrontation by Lily.

*Simon: I wasn't coming back because of that thing with Lily and me; I was bloody over it. I felt really misunderstood by Lily and by you and by the rest of the group as well. I had a bit of my own stuff going on with my guilt about not turning up on the mid-month thing. It's a bit to do with Lily and shutting her out and not speaking to her for the whole time but that's all my process and why I'm here; more to learn about myself and stuff.*

*Margaret: And all that needs to happen around that is to ask yourself 'where else do I do this' because in this environment you're allowed to make mistakes. So how did you get yourself into a situation with that job that you didn't get paid for? You'll spend your last dollar and then go, 'I know; I'll get some more money doing this job'.*

*Simon: I started the job without any money because I had none and then the bastard didn't pay me. I haven't had any cash for months and months because I couldn't work and I lay around in bed.*

*Margaret: It just didn't happen in the last few months. What happened before that?*

## 7 Money and Relationships: responsibility

*Simon: It was a choice I made back in November to quit my job because I wanted to be in the city with my son. And it's been really hard to find work, and I signed up to the rebirthing training and was kind of preoccupied for a few months.*

In this segment, a circular argument is appearing for Simon. He has no money because it is all spent. He starts a job without any money, and then doesn't get paid for the job—he still has no money. Throughout the discussion, Margaret is attempting to guide Simon to see his role in the scenario, however he finds reasons to avoid the issues: 'I couldn't work,' 'kind of preoccupied for a few months'. The discussion continues again the next day.

*Simon: What a shit month I've had man. And I've been, really grumpy and angry. But I'm feeling like its lifting. I haven't drunk that much but I haven't been avoiding it either; just working really hard.*

*Margaret: The idea is to integrate the course into your life. What concerns me is that I get a sense that between rebirthing weekends, you start drinking more, and then by the end of these weekends you're aware enough to say to yourself 'well I'm not going to do this anymore'. But then it wears off again during the next month.*

*Simon: For a lot of my mates, it's like I'm rejecting them; I'm just on soda water. And then when I start drinking I don't even notice its happening. By Wednesday I realise that I've drunk too much and I think 'Oh it's probably because I'm going to rebirthing'.*

*Margaret: It's your being; your spirit says, 'You're in for some more change. We're going to learn and grow again'. And your ego says, 'But I don't want to'. The more we make it wrong the more difficult it is to change.*

*Simon: I grew a lot that last month and that white light and that feeling I got still hasn't left me. In my core it's still really kind of solid since I started doing all this. It's like a little place to go in myself.*

Simon experiences a profound rebirth on the Sunday which he recounts during the debrief.

*At the very start my bills were attacking me. (Simon laughs.) And I couldn't get the fuckers off; they were growing up me. Then all of a sudden I had this big huge fire hose and it shot money out and I was squirting them all off but it wasn't working man. Then Lily said 'What's the hose connected up to' and I could see that it was connected to me so then I decided to throw the hose away and just pick them off one at a time and deal with them. Open one envelope at a time.*

Everyone joins in with Simon's laughter as he regales his account. Simon had previously admitted to the group that he did not open his bills to avoid confronting his mounting

financial problems. His demeanour has shifted completely from surly and grumpy to effusive and animated. He continues.

*Then I ended up with all this black shit flowing out of me man, and it was really quite emotional. It was pouring out of my arms and pouring out of my legs. And at one stage I had a row of semitrailers lined up and as I just dumped it all into the top of a semi it would drive off. I was getting it out anyway I could; it was endless this black shit that I was getting out of myself.*

*I felt much better and I was lying there feeling very nice and calm; I'd stopped crying. Then I noticed this big black tube inside me. I knocked the black off and this white light came. So then I got all these little scrubbers, like little street scrubbers, and they were going around the inside of me scrubbing all the rest of the black shit off me. By the end of it I was shining. All the different chakra points on me were glowing and I looked so shiny inside. (Another booming laugh punctuates his story.) I stood back and just admired it for the rest of the session; I felt like I was lying there with this big grin on my face.*

I interview Simon shortly after the money weekend.

*I think I lose it mid-month. I live in the country man, where people drink, smoke dope and fight, and upset each other and live fractured existences. So it's hard to not slip back into that when I'm not around rebirthing. But I can't see myself giving up drinking. I've still got no money. I've still got no choices but I've resigned myself to that. I still wake up every morning and I haven't got cancer. It's just my finances and I have to plaster at the moment.*

*I'm getting some stuff out of rebirthing. It's mainly just from the rebirths which I find myself using, especially that one about being full of all that black shit. It's been really handy to have around to keep catching myself thinking 'no no I'd better not do that man, that's guaranteed to put some black stuff back in me'. It's still really vivid now with me, staying in integrity with myself. So not a lot has changed but it's amazing how much has changed. To just look at all those other guys and the changes in them from really simple things like climbing a tree or deciding to finally be able to talk and all of those kinds of things. It's amazing how such little tiny things make such remarkable differences in people. And I feel more relaxed about things now. Nothing seems to really ruffle me for long now. I just breathe it off and I find myself breathing all the time.*

It is evident from this interview that Simon believes he has no choice to effect change; in rebirthing terms, he is not taking responsibility. As Margaret reiterates repeatedly throughout the training, 'for things to change, first I must change'. Simon argues that living in 'the real world with real people' makes it difficult for him to maintain the benefits from rebirthing that he articulates. It is also in relationship to his money that Simon is unable to link to the most explicit principle of the rebirthing training: that of choice. 'I've still got no choices' is Simon's rejoinder in spite of Margaret's attempts to show Simon that each step is a choice, and the choices he continues to make are unsupportive of his

life. Other participants are now expressing to me that their relationship with Simon is beginning to shift. Whilst there continues to be a great fondness for him, there is also a frustration that Simon continues to wax and wane within his journey. Margaret's comment 'he's a very spiritual man trying to play mediocre' resonates with several of the participants. Lily's summary is typical of the conversations I had with other participants.

*Watching him go from the guilty spoilt child sort of attitudes to 'it's everyone else's fault not mine' to starting to take responsibility again, he sort of goes through a big wave. For example, at the ropes course there was a huge shift in him in the sense of taking responsibility for himself and how he is with other people.*

Lily's comment reflects Simon's chaotic relationship with money which closely resembles the fluctuations in his relationships, both in the training and in his personal life.

Whilst this first section of the chapter has been concerned with the individual's relationship with money, this second section moves into the seventh training weekend of the rebirthing training, that of Relationships and Sexuality. Within the constraints of this thesis, I shall focus on the relationships aspect of this weekend—an intrinsic component of being human.

### **Relationships: something big has to move**

Relationship is described as the connection to someone else or to a group in a family. In an ideal world a child would grow up to be given the freedom to know and understand themselves as their true self. The condition of knowing one's self truly would prepare the person for healthy adult relationships with others and then also the natural progression into intimate relationship. (Participant Manual, Unit Seven: 4)

This quote places into context the necessity, within the rebirthing model, to explore and unravel childhood and adolescent experiences that are viewed to ultimately impact on the ability to form a 'healthy adult relationship'. Over the previous training weekends, the participants have had the opportunity to utilise the information gained to practice alternative ways of relating, making new choices and experiencing changes within those relationships. On Friday night the participants once more 'share' with the group. Lily was absent this night, uncommon for the training.

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*Paul: The last month has been supporting a family through a death process; it's been a bit bizarre. Probably the most support was needed by Mum; it was really hard for an eighty year old to bury her first-born son. Then finally having the balls to tell my sister to 'back off bitch'— (Paul laughs.) I've tolerated her needy sucky behaviour for years and I told her to fuck off. I've finally got some boundaries now.*

*Robyn: Five weeks ago when I had that last breathwork session, it left me on a real high and I felt really good. And I remembered the postulate<sup>47</sup> that I decided many years ago which is 'I am worthless and powerless'. Having that insight just took all that away all that fear and reluctance to be with people or that reluctance to give to myself. When I go away my husband usually doesn't come into the airport. When I got off the plane this time, he was standing there waiting for me and he had a rose behind his back. (Wolf-whistles and cheers break out.) That has never happened in my whole life. And it all brought me back to what Margaret says: 'When you change, things around you change.' So I've change my attitude around love and then it comes.*

*Gaylene: Since Trev (Gaylene's husband) picked me up after the last weekend he's been asking me things that he doesn't normally ask (Gaylene lets out a little laugh)—particularly since I've made the decision that something needs to change. So tonight I'm going to sit down and have a little chat with him about how we can work together to make our relationship happier. Something big has to move, because I'm just not happy any more.*

*Jonathon: I had a horrible day at work last week. My co-worker had some problems with the boss and we just kept feeding each other negativity all day. I went home with a thumping headache so I went into my room, put on my headphones to see if I could breathe it away. After some time white light flooded in; this sometimes happens to me. The anger and emotional stuff was gone; I just felt really clear so that was good.*

*Simon: I've just had this whirlwind romance with this new woman and it was great but I'm glad it's over man. Oh Jesus, she's one angry bitch man and it's really tested my powers of self-control not to get riled up at her all the time. She really did my head in; I had to call it off. We were really compatible in bed but man, I'm glad I'm out of there.*

Paul has actively instituted change in his relationship with his sister, the outcome yet to be seen. Both Robyn and Gaylene have noticed a shift in their relationships with their husbands. Robyn attributes this shift to a personal realisation about her past behaviour based on an old belief that she is 'worthless and powerless'. Gaylene comments on her husband having an increased interest in that 'he's been asking me things that he doesn't normally ask'. This is despite the fact that she is yet to confront her husband about the state of their relationship. Jonathon dwells on the impact of his work relationships and is able to utilise the rebirthing breathing technique to alter his emotional state. Simon regales the group with his brief romance; once again his self-deprecating sense of humour inciting laughter in the room.

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<sup>47</sup> In rebirthing terms, a postulate is a belief created as a result of an incident early in life and is held in the subconscious mind. This belief, once brought into awareness, no longer has a negative effect on the person's life.

## 7 Money and Relationships: responsibility

*Margaret: Why do you think people...often get into a relationship with the wrong person?*

*Simon: Loneliness.*

*Robyn: A pattern.*

*Jonathon: Passion.*

*Gaylene: Trying to find somebody who fills your weaknesses.*

*Margaret: Exactly, it's usually somebody that you're attracted to who fills some void that you often feel in yourself. So the trick to that is to learn to know yourself. If you don't know yourself in a relationship, it's really difficult to be with anybody else.*

These revelations offer an opportunity for Margaret to talk about relationships and then move to explaining codependency to the group. At this time, an information sheet is handed out titled 'Common codependent characteristics' (see Appendix 2).

### **Codependence: 'can't live, if living is without you'<sup>48</sup>**

*Margaret: How can we be in a relationship with somebody if we don't know who we are and we're not being our true self? People often get into a relationship in a bit of a haze. They pretend they're this or they pretend that they're that, but they can't keep up the façade and their partner eventually finds out.*

*Codependency is created by the needy child who as an adult is not able to stand alone and in their own power and relies on one or many for their survival. Healing the needy child is by way of teaching them to be more self-determined. They need to be able to self-check when doing life and ask the questions 'what do I think?' and 'what do I want?'*

After explaining and exploring with the participants various codependency attributes, Margaret continues.

*The problem with these behaviours is that they're addictive behaviours. Why would it become addictive?*

*Lily: Because you can control the people around you by using these sorts of behaviours.*

*Margaret: That's right. So do you get your needs met by doing this? Does anyone recognise themselves in here?*

Margaret pauses, allowing the participants an opportunity to respond to her question. After reflections and discussion, Margaret continues.

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<sup>48</sup> This is a line from the song Without You by Harry Nilsson, originally produced by Badfinger in 1970.

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*The problem with codependency is basically it's an addiction to what other people think about you and you act accordingly; you suppress yourself.*

Although this list of codependent characteristics is long, it is not prescriptive from the training perspective. As Margaret points out, 'you may recognise yourself in some or many of the attributes on this list. Only you will know what fits for you'.

*Robyn: I recognise myself in some of these things. But where does that sit with being responsible—raising children or being in a job?*

*Margaret: You don't abdicate your responsibility; your responsibility is really an ethical process. It's responsible to be 100% independent so that you're not liable to the rest of the planet. That is, you are responsible for your bills, feeding and clothing yourself, you're responsible for your family while you are raising them. By the time they reach adulthood, you would have taught them about personal responsibility.*

*Simon: So what's the opposite of codependence? Independence?*

Margaret moves over to the flip chart stand and draws a series of diagrams as she speaks.

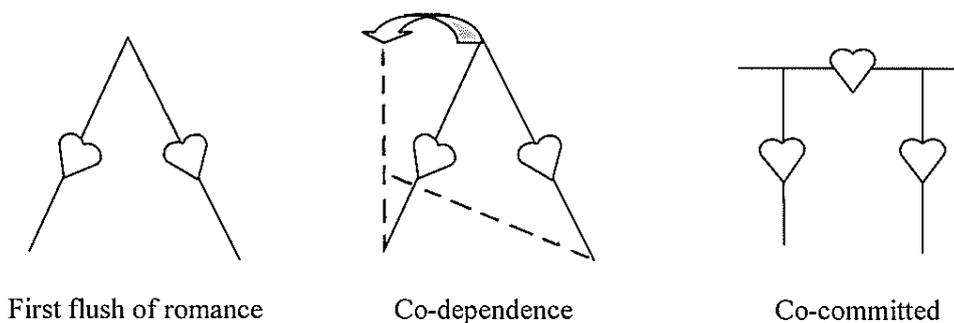


Figure 3: Models of relationships

*Margaret: Two people in the first flush of romance, look like this. (Margaret points to the first figure.) These two people are leaning on each other, in love with each other. However, if the relationship continues this way and develops into codependence, when the stronger one stands up, the other will fall over (second figure). In a healthy relationship, it's like two people standing strong and independent, sharing this roof which is love (third figure). That's called co-commitment or interdependent. The problem is that we were taught codependence at a very early age. We learnt to be good so that we would get better treatment. We learnt the addiction because it made us feel good—giving other people what they want so you will get back what you want.*

## 7 Money and Relationships: responsibility

*Gaylene: But that's a survival thing; you're literally dependent on your mother for survival when you're young. So what's the alternative?*

*Margaret: Grow out of it. Most adults are still doing this stuff; they have a mental and emotional age of a six year old. One way out of it, from my observation, is to keep asking the questions: 'What do I think?' 'What do I want?' Then when you find out what it is that you think, ask 'who's thought is that?' Often it is the thought of a parent, particularly the mother.*

Once more Margaret advises the participants to reflect on childhood influences.

*Gaylene: So what if both of you in the relationship are codependent?*

*Margaret: Well they both have to be to have a codependent relationship. Look you cannot heal alone. When you do your healing, the people around you change. So what happens, when you start being less codependent your partner gets that freedom as well.*

*Robyn: The other thing I was going to ask, Alan is a first-class martyr. I used to get cross with him and give up; letting him be the dominant controlling one but then he'd moan about it. Now I say things like 'you did that, now I'm going to do this'.*

*Margaret: Well I've got to say it, you've stopped being covertly hostile.*

*Robyn: What do you mean by that?*

*Margaret: When you were angry with him you stopped doing things, and that's covert hostility. Now you've stopped doing that; you've become overt and speaking up.*

*Lily: So you're better saying 'I'm off for such-and-such a reason?'*

*Margaret: Exactly—you're better off saying it directly.*

A picture of the responsible adult is emerging from these accounts and the participants appear to be bringing together a number of themes under the direction of Margaret. The recognition of childhood behaviours throughout the training to this time, combined with the rebirthing tenet 'for things to change, first I must change,' enable the participants to make changes within their lives—in effect, increase their personal agency. Codependency, as a concept, is central to rebirthing for the transformation of unhealthy relationships. Drawing on the characteristics of codependency, the participants gain insight to the changes they have made. Jonathon takes overt responsibility for his emotional state; Paul challenges his sister's behaviour; Robyn recognises that changes she has made have resulted in changed behaviour of her husband; Gaylene notices the change in her husband reflecting that she has simply made a decision that 'something needs to change'. Responsibility, a recurring theme in this training, entails the responsibility of providing and caring for the self via financial means, and emotional

responsibility by taking personal responsibility by meeting one's own needs within relationships, through releasing codependent behaviours, and practicing interdependence.

The author of *Codependent No More*, recovering addict and alcoholic Melody Beattie<sup>49</sup> (1987:31) proposes that '[a] codependent person is one who has let another person's behaviour affect him or her, and who is obsessed with controlling that person's behaviour'. Early in its history, codependency was associated with chemical dependency, notably alcohol. However, in more recent times, that definition has broadened. As David Parker (2012a, italics in original), a UK rebirther specialising in codependence and addiction, writes in his blog:

The concept of codependency is now much broader than the neglected lover, the battered wife, alcoholic partner or victim of marriage. It affects not just women. Men can *love too much* too or become attached to a career that no longer offers stimulation while all genders can become encased in codependent traits like perfectionism, people pleasing and approval addiction. ... going to the gym *too much*, shopping *too much* or eating *too much wrong food* to avoid emotions, have become modern day norms ... Being controlled by and controlling others is part of society's dysfunction within interpersonal relationships. It all starts in the family with power, competition, winning or losing.

This weekend also brings relationship dynamics amongst the group into the open. Conversations I had with various participants during the time between workshops revealed that they all were developing new and meaningful relationships with one another. 'It's such a diverse range of people, but we're all so connected and we just want to be there so much for ourselves as well as for each other,' reported one. Another commented, 'I really love the group, I feel very relaxed. And whether it's the group or whether it's just my intention to be just completely open and honest because if I'm going to do this I'm going to do it properly'. However, tension is also reported. As one participant reports: 'There are times when I struggle with Robyn's manner. I bristle some times and I feel a great deal of compassion for her. I think that she's been incredibly squashed for a number of years, and I would love to see her change that.' What has become evident throughout the training is that, implicitly, notions of self are constantly

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<sup>49</sup> Melody Beattie was a pioneer in codependency in the New Age

being challenged as the training progresses and various relationship dynamics are being revealed.

The notion of the individual as ‘an indivisible self or person [an] essential core, or spirit of a singular human being, which ... defines that self in its particularity’ (Smith 2012:4) has been long-contested. The ongoing exploration of the participants, both within themselves and their relationships past and present, attest to a sense of self within the rebirthing context that occupies a middle ground between the ‘individual’, as defined above, and the ‘dividual’ of Dumont and Strathern. This middle ground, I suggest, is best described as interdependence where persons are ‘defined in relation to others, depend on others for knowledge about themselves, grasp power as the ability to do and to act, grow as the beneficiary of others’ actions and so forth’ (LiPuma 1998:60). Furthermore, the interdependent subject which embraces the ongoing exploration of self is also a ‘porous subject’ (Smith 2012:9), energetically open and available to its environment.

This nexus of interdependence combined with that of individuals as ‘porous’ subjects assists in analysing the experiences of my informants. It utilises the complexity of people’s early lives being situated in a particular environment, being moulded and shaped by their childhood experiences to inform the constantly shifting relationships. These relationships are multiple: relationships between people, between people and their wider communities, and ultimately their relationship with themselves. Smith (*ibid.*:7) best summarises the self that the participants of my fieldwork are exploring as:

a core self upon which shifting identities are constructed ... within the psychological discourse of continuous self-development, this supposedly stable core is itself the site of self-development, the subject of self-improvement.

Throughout the training, the participants have been presented with opportunities to recall, re-experience and re-assess choices made, in both this lifetime and past lifetimes. This heightened level of awareness offers them the opportunity to make new choices for the future—exercising 100% responsibility and thus, agency. As such, their sense of self and their relationships are being constantly negotiated and renegotiated. Jackson (1998:53) proposes that ‘[t]hough a singular person exists with and through others, he or she may be diminished rather than strengthened in this relationship, eclipsed rather than

fulfilled'. This diminishing and eclipsing of a person may be demonstrated through the revealing of family secrets; a component of the Saturday afternoon of the relationships weekend.

***Family secrets: 'don't tell anyone'***

Keegan (1991:49) writes: '[t]hrough their socialization they will learn to lie about their thoughts and feelings, to deny themselves and others the truth and to protect the family at all costs, which for many will include their physical and emotional wellbeing.' This need to 'protect the family at all costs' results in, what Margaret calls, family secrets. From the training perspective, family secrets are seen as institutionalised codependence: family members relying on keeping the secret to maintain a façade for each other and their community. Margaret confronts the participants.

*Now let's get down to the nitty gritty here. What is your family of origin's secret? What are they trying to hide from the rest of the world?*

*Gaylene: Basically mine was a very functional family. Nothing horrendous happened. There was no abuse. I never felt, well apart from feeling fear about everything, I never felt that the family was controlling, not the whole family unit. Dad definitely was a control freak.*

*Margaret: Think about that Gaylene.*

There is a group gasp and Gaylene sits up in her seat and continues:

*My understanding of dysfunction is the modern-day dysfunction druggie parent or an alcoholic parent who doesn't look after their kids.*

*Margaret: Oh no, it's much more subtle than that. Matter of fact, when you grow up knowing that your family's dysfunctional, it's fantastic because you can go, 'Yep I can handle that'. But the subtle dysfunction is much more difficult to spot.*

A powerful discourse within the self-help lexicon and utilised by rebirthing is that of the dysfunctional family. As Bradshaw<sup>50</sup> (1988:61) expounds, '[d]ysfunctional families are created by dysfunctional marriages. Dysfunctional marriages are created by dysfunctional individuals who seek out and marry each other'. According to Margaret (Trainers Manual Unit Seven: 4), this dysfunction is embedded in 'a society in which

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<sup>50</sup> John Bradshaw is an American motivational speaker and author of popular psychology. He has presented a range of television programs on topics including addiction, codependency and the dysfunctional family.

children are taught to be part of the crowd and to blend in to be accepted [thus] the opportunity for the child's discovery of its true nature is curtailed severely'. This loss of self is seen as the source of codependency.

*Gaylene: Mine wasn't perfect but I always assumed the dysfunction was on my part because my brothers were never scared like me. One certainly wasn't; the joy rider wasn't.<sup>51</sup> (Gaylene gives a little chuckle.) He wasn't scared.*

*Margaret: No, but you see he's acting out isn't he. That's fear of not being noticed or not being acknowledged for who he really is. But I want you to consider the fact that it's not normal for people to grow up in fear.*

*Jonathon: Similarly I sort of lived my life in fear. (Jonathon pauses.) It's just dropped into my head. I was actually the family secret. Probably years before I was consciously gay, my parents had something figured out. I was so naive and just in such fear and denial that I just buried myself in books.*

*Paul: My parents came from very working class backgrounds, made a shitload of money and moved into upper middle-class circles and wanted their roots well and truly hidden. So our family secret was 'we're poverty scum, we're nouveau riche but don't let anyone know'. And I was certainly another family secret—being gay.*

*Simon: We were poor pretending to be rich sort of stuff too. Dad's drinking and depression; Dad was really like a bit of a shithead. We used to all play this game like he was some great dad (Simon laughs) and we were all so proud of him but he wasn't. I think I was a bit of a family secret as well because I was off abusing drugs and sneaking out and all that stuff, worrying everybody. The family kept it all a big secret.*

*Robyn: I don't know that we had family secrets. The only thing I can think of is the fighting between my parents. That was obviously significant to me—and my father's alcoholism.*

*Margaret: We've got to dig deeper here. We're not blaming parents. What we're saying is, 'They did this and this is the effect on me and I have to do something about what's happened to me', that's all. So Robyn, there's a secret there somewhere. What about your daughter in England.*

*Robyn: Oh yes she would be a secret. Definitely with Alan, he doesn't speak about it. So that's what I'm escaping from; the reality of having a gay daughter.*

*Margaret: You're keeping her a secret the same way as these guys' parents kept them a secret. You could be embracing her as your daughter; 100%, unconditional love and acceptance possibly.*

*Robyn: I give her unconditional love, but I don't feel comfortable with her sexuality.*

*Margaret: I'll give you something now, not just for you but for everybody. In unconditional love, there are no BUTS. Unconditional love is unconditional love. 'I don't care—you can go and do anything you like AND I will never stop loving you.'*

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<sup>51</sup> Gaylene had previously told the group about her brother who had several episodes of joy-riding in his teen years resulting in much family disquiet.

## 7 Money and Relationships: responsibility

*Paul: From my experience, I think the day that I actually felt that I had unconditional love from my mother was the day that she turned and told my father to fuck off because she then took her own road with her relationship with me. It was really important to me as a gay man to have my mother say, 'this is my way with it'. And yeah, it caused a huge rift in their marriage for some time but that was huge for me, for her to take a position.*

It is evident from these accounts that family secrets hold great power through the emotion of shame—shame that 'our' family is not good enough, is somehow defective. Within this group, the shame of homosexuality within the family stands out; Jonathon and Paul being gay, and Robyn having a gay daughter. Keegan describes this process as 'learn[ing] to lie' and...need[ing] to 'protect the family at all costs'. Margaret has to coach Robyn into admitting her family secret. Jonathon takes some time before it forms in his own mind. Paul has previously recounted how his homosexuality actually drove a wedge between him and his father. By implication, the confrontation of the secret by Paul's mother, whilst it 'caused a huge rift' in his parents' marriage, reaffirmed her love for him.

From a rebirthing perspective, by the family collectively avoiding being honest—taking responsibility—results in the family secrets reproducing shame in family members. Bradshaw (1988:45) describes this shame as a 'neurotic shame induced by the poisonous pedagogy. That shame is no longer an E-motion. It has become the core of our identity'. Within the rebirthing field, this shame becomes intrinsically instrumental in the production of personal identity. Codependency within the family is reinforced, ultimately constraining responsibility by the individual.

Simon and Paul both recount families that had made money and were afraid of having their backgrounds of poverty being exposed. Another recurring theme of shame is that of alcohol consumption for Robyn and Simon; Simon's father also having the added complication of depression. It is evident from these accounts just how deeply the shame is felt in the various scenarios. At this point, I look around the room and there is a softness in the faces of all those present; a tenderness in the way they have felt safe enough to come to this point of exposing family secrets. The safety and trust in this small cohort of people has expanded to encompass the most vulnerable aspects of their beings, vulnerability that they may have kept hidden from themselves. Their trust in Margaret is such that they permit her to coach and coax their innermost worlds to be

exposed. As such, Margaret has encouraged high levels of trust as well as high levels of vulnerability within the participants, which is required to introduce them to warm water rebirthing.

### **Warm Water Rebirth: back to the womb**

Instead of the usual shared rebirths on Sunday afternoon of the weekend, the participants undertake a warm water rebirth that takes up the best part of the Sunday of the seventh weekend. Margaret explains.

*A rebirther would not use this technique as a first introduction to rebirthing. The rebirther must establish that the client can breathe the rebirthing breath for an hour at a time, and that the client has full confidence in the rebirther.*

*The warm water rebirthing technique can have a profound effect on the participant. The technique has the ability to activate feelings that were experienced in the womb by the foetus, especially any feelings of bliss and carefree happiness. As a result of life's experiences, these sensations can be forgotten. This warm water experience can provide for the client a reprogramming in the cells of the body that they are in reality totally supported and can be perfectly safe in their watery environment.*

The warm water rebirth takes place at a private indoor pool that is heated to a temperature of thirty-seven degrees. The pool is deep enough for the rebirther to stand in without stooping and to be able to hold the rebirthing participant at waist level. The participant wears goggles, a snorkel and a set of nose clips to prevent the water from entering the nostrils. They then lie face down in the water being supported by the rebirther who places one hand under their chest/abdomen with the other hand free to either communicate with a set of predetermined taps on their backs. A recording of a heart beat is played during the warm water rebirth, and the participants are supported to breathe the conscious connected breath through the snorkel for up to an hour. The warm water rebirth is designed to simulate the physical sensations of being in the womb thus creating the environment that may activate birth memories. Once the rebirth is completed, the rebirther then assists their respective charges out of the pool slowly, sitting on the edge of the pool until they are able to stand. They are then put under a cold shower for a minimum of thirty seconds to 'bring the client back into the body,' which also 'helps the client re-enter the atmosphere of air and re-enacts the cold felt as a

newborn, born into the evaporative atmosphere of air at birth' (Trainers Manual, Unit Seven: 33).

We arrive at a private pool which is within walking distance of Margaret's home. There is excitement amongst the participants and they fuss about storing their lunches in the fridge, changing into their pool gear, and setting up their towels and clothing for after the first rebirth. The pool is enclosed, and the assistants have placed lighted tea candles around the edges. Plastic pitchers of water and tumblers are positioned on the edges of the pool as well as piles of face washers. As Margaret explains, they are for mopping up spittle which can be copious, and for wiping faces as they emerge from the pool.



Plate 6: Warm water rebirthing

The participants pair up and enter the pool; the first rebirthees prepare themselves for their experience. Paul is going first with Simon as his rebirther. Robyn and Jonathon are partners, and Lily is with Gaylene. I watch from the edge of the pool. Whilst Lily and Robyn quickly settle into their floating position in the water, Paul struggles to get started. He attempts to put his head in several times, however quickly re-emerges from the water, spluttering and visibly disturbed. Margaret is in the water and assists Simon to guide Paul into the warm water rebirthing position. Simon stands by Paul's left shoulder, supporting Paul with his hand under his chest. It takes a little time for Paul to settle into

just floating and breathing. He finally starts breathing through the snorkel. However, within ten minutes he surfaces again, spluttering and coughing, and holding onto the edge of the pool. I watch as Margaret swims over and talks to him. Paul shakes his head. Margaret assists Paul into turning onto his back and being cradled like a baby in Simon's arms. Paul closes his eyes and relaxes. His face is peaceful. Simon whispers to him, maintaining a focussed attention on Paul.

Lily and Robyn both breathe underwater for the full hour, both eventually emerging and also being held baby-like in the water by their respective partners. After lunch, they swap places and the second rebirth takes place. Gaylene and Jonathon both initially find it challenging floating face-down in the water. Eventually they both relax into the process. Simon has no such difficulty and starts his rebirth quickly and uneventfully.

Throughout the day, a sense of peace prevails, despite the discomfort of some of the participants. The pool is warm and relaxing; the only real disturbance are the screams emanating from the cold showers—we all laugh when they occur; from our own memories and the knowledge of the sensations resulting from that cold stream of water. Once completed, we all walk back to Margaret's house for the final debrief.

*Lily: That was out of this world. That's addictive. I just left my body and I wasn't falling asleep. It was just like going to another realm or something it was just magic. And I felt so relaxed and so comfortable with Gaylene.*

*Gaylene: I'm just overwhelmed with a sense of peace, especially as I thought I'd panic about not being able to breathe through my nose. And then I needed to cough and I gave it a try. Oh, I can cough under water. (She laughs.) I stayed pretty well with my breathing; not a lot happened. Just that sense of weightlessness and peace and relaxation. It was really nice.*

*Jonathon: After the initial thirty second panic, I relaxed into it quite quickly. I think I was re-experiencing a lot of the breathing stuff as a premi-baby and it was quite raspy and choppy. So that was really interesting. And then there was this huge shudder thing went through my body and it was just bliss after that. For the rest of the time, I just breathed and I don't really remember anything else in my head. It was just lovely—floating and breathing.*

*Robyn: It was a bit weird. It felt like I was in the womb and I could feel the heart beat. At some point, I could actually hear Mum and Dad talking. After a while, I felt like I wanted to move like I was going to crawl. (Robyn gives a small chuckle.) I thought, 'Oh this is weird, can't do that'. But at the end, I went off and saw my mum and my dad. I got the white light and all that stuff so that was really lovely.*

*Jonathon: So you were actually in the womb, per se, but you didn't really experience a birth.*

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*Robyn: I probably could have done. It felt like the womb was getting tighter and tighter you know how a baby, and my head was starting to like, extend and I thought 'No. What am I supposed to do?' And then I came up and it was like I felt like I was drowning. And then the air was there so that was the sensation of being born. When I came up out of the water, I could feel the heart between the three of us. (An assistant had supported Jonathon through the emergence of Robyn and stayed connected physically as well as emotionally as Jonathon held her.) It was like a pulsating; it was freaking me out at first. Then I realised what it was—I've never had that before.*

*Margaret: It was just beautiful to watch. It's the tenderness that is in us, once you let go of all that façade. (Margaret laughs.) It's an understanding; unconditional love really, for everybody. And if we're really going to have a relationship, that's what we ideally need to feel with our partners. It's there; it's there in every one of us.*

*Simon: Well that was an experience. I had some little process but I think that was just shaking my ex-partner out of my soul and I had a bit of a sob about that. Then I just went places. I felt like I was moving so much, that when I was breathing in, I was floating to the top of the ocean, and then when I was breathing out, I was sinking back down. And I was in clouds and in the stars; yeah, it felt great and then just lots of warm fuzzies of life and I just kept breathing away.*

*Paul: It was short. I had trouble in the first few minutes just getting the motion of the breathing thing under water. But then I got into the rhythm and it went deep so quickly; there wasn't a conscious thought in my head. I was just totally out of it. Then I just felt this incredible, like shudders and pain, and I had to come up. I couldn't breathe and so I have no idea whether it was a birth. But when I came up, somebody asked if I wanted to go down again. I can remember saying 'no' because, like, I couldn't go back to that—I needed to go to a different place and that floating on the top of the water afterwards was as deep as face down in the pool. But with it all there wasn't a conscious thought.*

After talking about his experience in the pool, Paul thanks Simon for his support. 'That's alright; you turned into a beautiful baby,' Simon replies and laughs. Margaret adds, 'And you were such a beautiful dad. I've got to say that the love in the pool was palpable and we were all crying'. The freedom of emotional expression within the group is evident in this account in distinct contrast to the emotional state of the participants when they first commenced the rebirthing training.

During the warm water rebirth, Paul is not able to identify what he is experiencing as a re-enactment of his birth. His mind is empty; he is lying in the pool breathing. Physical sensations are his primary source of stimuli: initially, the difficulty of relaxing into breathing through the snorkel, then the body sensations and inability to breathe. His refusing to go back there may fit the scenario of birth; there is no returning once born. Yet both he and Simon agree that they participated in a newly born baby and father encounter which, from a rebirthing perspective, facilitated an embodied re-enactment of

the birth experience for Paul in which his father played an intimate role. This stands in direct contrast to Paul's recounting of his original birth and subsequent difficult relationship with his father.

An implicit agreement runs through the group; alternative states of consciousness have been experienced. Robyn acknowledges that what she experienced may have been a birth experience. Robyn reports, 'the air was there [and] that was the sensation of being born'. Simon's experience is described as 'when I was breathing in, I was floating to the top of the ocean, and then when I was breathing out, I was sinking back down. And I was in clouds and in the stars'. 'It was just like going to another realm or something, it was just magic', is how Lily sums up her experience. For Jonathon 'there was this huge shudder thing [which] went through my body and it was just bliss after that ...I just breathed and I don't really remember anything else in my head. It was just lovely floating and breathing'. Gaylene describes her experience as 'a sense of weightlessness and peace and relaxation. It was really nice'. One of the assistants comments, 'Gaylene just looked like an angel after that. She looked like a newborn baby. It was just amazing'. Another assistant replies, 'They get those eyes newborns have'.

When asked who would benefit from warm water rebirthing, Margaret answers.

*People who have trouble trusting the world. And they suddenly find out they can just relax, let go and be supported and loved. Or people who never get any tension out of their body, who are always sort of fully wired. They're really good candidates often because their mother has had so much fear so they've brought that with them in the experience. So you take them back to that womb experience, really womb memory, and they come out of it and they go 'actually that was alright. I am safe and I am supported and I can be okay here.'*

Whilst during the high-ropes course the participants' levels of trust and support for each other dramatically increased, it is during this warm water rebirth that the participants have developed a far deeper emotional connection with one another. The love, tenderness and unconditional acceptance of one another was demonstrated during the session and articulated through their accounts of their experiences.

## **Conclusion**

Through the course of the rebirthing training participants have been exploring, sequentially, their own personal journeys through life. The initial part of the training has revealed infant and childhood experiences and subsequent personal decisions made by the participants. As a result, the opportunity to start the process of making new choices and instituting changes in their lives was begun. Spending a challenging day during the fear weekend required the participants to draw on deeper levels of support and trust. The two weekends covered in this chapter, Money and Relationships, has brought the participants into the 'adult' realm. According to the rebirthing model, adulthood is defined by personal responsibility, chiefly identifiable through an individual demonstrating both financial and relational responsibility, whether that relationship is with themselves or another. Analysis of the ethnography illuminated the choices and changes that various participants were making, or in the case of Simon, the challenges he was facing in making those changes. Levels of honesty and trust were lifted again through the revealing of family secrets and the shame that was instilled in family members as a consequence. This trust enabled the culmination of the seventh weekend—the warm water rebirth—a practice that is not introduced until the participants achieved, according to Margaret, 'a high level of personal responsibility'. Trust increased and as a result, relationships became stronger. Adding the heightened levels of personal responsibility, the participants were subsequently positioned to extend that responsibility to their co-participants, supporting one another unconditionally through the warm water rebirth. As a result, as the conditions of the womb were reproduced in this process, the participants had an opportunity to re-experience their birth in a positive, supportive and loving manner. After this experience, the participants reported embodied experiences that may be termed alternative states of consciousness. This experience prepared the participants for the next training weekend, which moves into the spiritual realm. Writing of peoples' consciousness and spiritual experiences, Edith Turner states (2006:34):

to study ordinary human changes of consciousness, certain of us have had to shift our own invisible, real spiritual life and what we know of that of others into a position to the front and have it working in us, so that we fully know the material of our fieldwork. We've then written this material, intimately.

## 8

# God, Death and Immortality: the completion of this journey

## Introduction

David Tacey (2003:1-2) writes in *The Spirituality Revolution*:

It is a spontaneous movement in society, a new interest in the reality of spirit and its healing effects on life, health, community and wellbeing...The spiritual life is no longer a specialist concern, confined to the interests of a religious group. No membership is required to relate to spirit. Spirituality is now the concern of everyone, religious or secular, young or old, atheist or believer, educated or otherwise, because we inhabit a different world in which spirit is making new and quite extraordinary demands.

This chapter addresses the final two weekends of the rebirthing training: God, Death, and Immortality on the eighth weekend, anecdotally known as the Spirituality weekend, followed by Completion on the last weekend.

Anthropologists Palgi and Abramovitch (1984:385) propose that '[d]eath awareness is a natural sequel to the development of self-awareness—an intrinsic attribute of humankind'. Having started the training with conception and birth, it is only fitting that the topic of death be addressed near the end of the training. As the participants have invested in their transformations over the training, it is in the spirituality weekend of the training when the final stage of life, in its current form, is confronted—the ultimate confrontation of one's mortality on a spiritual journey. Within rebirthing, at a personal level, the totality of existence is infinite as the human being is considered immortal. In keeping with rebirthing philosophy, death provides an opportunity for reincarnation, thus drawing the concept of immortality into the discussion. Margaret offers the participants opportunities to challenge their beliefs and start formulating their own ideas by providing

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two major processes through which to explore bodily experiences of spiritual awareness: past life regression and cold-water rebirthing.

The second topic of this chapter is the Completion weekend, 'one that participants tend never to forget' (Trainers Manual, Unit Nine: 1). This weekend is rendered even more memorable and demanding by the inclusion of the cold water rebirth on the Saturday morning—a process in which the principles of rebirthing studied over the previous nine months coalesce. Emotionally, the participants are anticipating the final days and moving away from the safety of this training and fully 're-entering' the world outside the rebirthing training program. There are still questions unanswered, and information and experience to intellectually absorb.

Throughout the training, relationships within the group have developed and deepened as trust within the group has grown. Subsequently, the willingness to be 'open' and honest with themselves and each other has also deepened. A long rite of passage is being completed, one in which transformation has been facilitated, and through the final completion ceremony a symbolic severing of ties and movement will take place as they step out into the next phase of their lives. The closure of this section of their life journeys is a time of joy and sadness. Margaret reveals to the group,

*There's something special about this weekend that nobody ever forgets. Sunday is an amazing day with acknowledgments and love really. So you will be totally loved up by the time you have finished. (Margaret laughs.) You'll float out of here. And do remember that this is not the end; it is the beginning because you've laid the foundations. Now you need to go out there and practice with this information. You take it, practise it, and make small corrections.*

Love is a subject that has appeared regularly throughout the training: self-love, 'conditional' love of parental disapproval, love in codependent and interdependent relationships, and unconditional love. In this chapter, love emerges as a major theme.

### God

The weekend begins one participant short; Simon has not arrived on the Friday night. Whilst Margaret attempts to contact Simon by phone, albeit unsuccessfully, the group

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gathers in the training room. The atmosphere is very relaxed and jovial; the participants chat and laugh amongst themselves. Friday night begins with discussions on the concept of God, drawing on rebirthing concepts of spirituality and how these differ from traditional views of God and spirituality. Margaret writes in the Training Manual (Unit Eight: 4):

The description of God is different for every human being. A great deal depends on the cultural upbringing of a person and the learnt beliefs passed to the child. Rebirthing is not a religion-based modality and has no connection with any religion of any kind. Rebirthing is a technique that gives individuals the opportunity to have an experience of a connection to their own spirituality and yet it has no attachment to dogma. A rebirther must allow the beliefs of a client to be honoured and respected.

Margaret begins with a basic question.

*Let's talk about God. What is God?*

*Gaylene: It's an entity that some people believe in; energy maybe.*

*Robyn: Something higher than yourself; a higher being.*

*Jonathon: The creator.*

*Gaylene: Well he gets a lot of blame for bad things that happen. Also used as a threat; God will punish you.*

*Lily: Like reasons for war like 'God told me.'*

*Paul: It gives some people a code of conduct.*

*Gaylene: That's what the laws of our society are based on aren't they?*

*Lily: God is love<sup>52</sup>.*

The beliefs and values of a predominantly Protestant Christian heritage (Walter 2002:134) punctuate the discourse of the participants. Evident in this discussion is a wide range of notions of God ranging from the fundamental Christian version of the vengeful God to a concept of God as energy or love. The influence of God on moral and ethical behaviour also emerges. Margaret then asks:

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<sup>52</sup> A definition most likely drawn from the Bible: 'God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him' (1 John 4:16b).

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Where do you think all this stuff has come from?

Paul: Stories passed on.

Robyn: Indoctrination.

Lily: Institutionalised.

Robyn: From men who think they're holier than thou.

Paul: It's been used throughout history for power and control.

The influence of the past—stories, indoctrination and the assertion that power and control has been institutionalised—is evident in the responses of the participants. The discussion continues.

*Margaret: Listening to your responses we can see that God is such a loaded word. So as rebirthers we need to take all the negativity out of this word. Because if you look at how it is used as a threat and as a way of behaving—even when you pray to God for money or something, it's like God will drop it into your lap. Now that's a great way of abdicating your responsibility.*

Margaret draws the discussion back to responsibility—the abdication of responsibility.

*Margaret: So the problem here is that we're not really self-determined about our spirituality. What rebirthing gives people is that the God essence is in everybody. Often clients they feel like they're 100% unloved. They've had a shitty life and everything's gone wrong. Just slowly and gradually, once they learn to love themselves, they'll get into contact with something else and that really is the essence of love which is God—their spirituality, and that's where all healing exists.*

At this point, Margaret reiterates Lily's comment 'God is love', that within the rebirthing context, God and love are interchangeable. The goal of self-love has been implicit throughout the training, but has now become explicit. From a rebirthing perspective, it is 'the love that we have for ourselves, others, society and the environment that [generates] the courage and commitment' (Manné 1997:83)<sup>53</sup> for the transformational process of rebirthing. At the same time, Margaret reinforces the spiritual nature of healing.

The atmosphere in the room is distinctly different to the previous week when Simon was present. When I reflect on the emotional state of these participants when they first

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<sup>53</sup> Joy Manné: psychotherapist, Buddhist practitioner and author in personal growth and spirituality,

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started the training, the change is dramatic. There has been a major shift from the fear and uncertainty at the beginning of the training to now where they participate freely; an uninhibited discussion in comparison to the teacher/pupil atmosphere of those earlier sessions. Levels of trust have risen, most significantly since the fear weekend. They are more 'open'; from a rebirthing perspective—more open to exploring their feelings and bodily experiences, trusting themselves and each other, and participating more fully with the group. The evening continues with further discussions about concepts of God, spirituality, morals and ethics, and the impact of rebirthing on peoples' perceptions of their own personal spirituality.

As Margaret points out, 'God, being such a loaded word, requires investigating to challenge the beliefs that the students have incorporated from the past'. In the rebirthing training, Margaret draws on concepts of God and spirituality that reflect longstanding rebirthing discourse and can be traced through breathwork/rebirthing texts.

In the initial period of rebirthing, God featured prominently, possibly as a result of Orr's history as a born-again Christian. Orr and Ray (1977:249), for example, discussed God in relationship to the Ten Commandments: 'Thou shalt have no other gods before me,' and propose that 'if there is only one God in the universe, then everything in the universe is part of God'. Leonard and Laut (1983:107), whilst avoiding using the word spirituality, proposed an energy variously labelled as 'Universal Energy, God, Life Force, Infinite Manifestation'. Morningstar wrote (1994:xiii), 'I become one with the God who is breathing life into my cells', and for him, rebirthing provides the 'spiritual intention of loving union with universal life' (ibid.:49). Some authors of breathwork/rebirthing books avoid using the word God (Minett 2004:17-18; Taylor, K 1994:123)<sup>54</sup>. Referring to the spiritual aspect of the self as 'Soul', Manné (1997:81) proposes that 'Love is the basis of...spiritual life, and of all development. Soul is Love...If it is not Love, it is not Soul'.

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<sup>54</sup> Gunnel Minett: European breathwork practitioner and psychologist.

Kylea Taylor: trained in Holotropic Breathwork, Taylor currently lives in the USA. As a senior trainer for the Grof Transpersonal Training, Taylor also has a private therapy and consulting practice.

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Love and its relationship to spirituality and God appears to be a recurring theme of this part of the training. The topic of love is further elaborated by Margaret on Saturday morning.

*Margaret: All the masters have said 'God is love'. Spirituality is only about love.*

Gaylene asks the question: 'So what is love?'

*Margaret: love is an openness of heart. It means your heart doesn't close off when you're angry with them, you still love them. For example, although I'm disappointed that Simon has dropped out of the course, that it doesn't stop me from loving him.*

Margaret expresses unconditional love for Simon.

*Robyn: I struggle with the love side. I know that my heart is not open as much as what I would like it to be. While I do have a love for people and compassion and all that sort of stuff, I do put the brakes on because, for me, it's a fear thing. For example, the love in this group here; when it comes to an end, everybody's going to feel something like grief. I don't like the feelings that go with all of that.*

At this moment, Robyn is articulating issues around love she experiences in her life. That she is so clear with her communication and willing to speak of it to the group may represent a transformation for Robyn in the deepening of her levels of trust and openness within the group. Margaret guides Robyn through an exploration of her difficulties with losing 'connections'.

*Margaret: It's the fear of loss I'm hearing; a fear of losing that connection. Is that what it is?*

*Robyn: Well I didn't realise that I was getting close to a person that I've worked with recently until it was time to finish and it was just agony.*

*Margaret: That's grief and grief comes from what?*

*Paul: ARC break.*

*Robyn: how can that be an ARC break when you come to the end of something?*

*Margaret: Because you are stopping communication. And when you stop communicating there is no understanding and that leads to grief. The feelings you get with the passage of people in and out of your life are something that as humans we have to deal with. And love doesn't mean attachment. There's that old proverb that says 'if you love something you let it go.' And it takes practice.*

*Robyn: Yes but it's hard.*

Robyn laughs again—she is visibly more relaxed than previous weekends. Margaret, by drawing on the ARCU model, demonstrates how the loss of love results in grief.

## **Spiritual Immortality and Past Life Regression**

Further discussion about spirituality eventually progresses to the subject of immortality. Bowman (2000b:90) proposes that '[i]n alternative spirituality...it is increasingly commonplace to believe in reincarnation, and in the possibility of recalling past lives'. These concepts are embedded within rebirthing, reflected by the premise 'that a soul is immortal and never dies as such but simply drops its body to start again at a later stage of its choice' (Training Manual, Unit Eight:6). Immortality, the soul, reincarnation and the notion of the body as an energy schema are highlighted by Minett (1994:169) constituting rebirthing perspectives:

In Eastern philosophy, the soul is composed of eternal energy. The prana (life energy) that separates the living from the dead cannot be destroyed, only changed, the body is created and dissolved, but the soul merely takes on a new shape, or body, each successive lifetime. It is this energy which is our true self.

To provide an opportunity for the participants to challenge their own perceptions and to personally experience these concepts, Margaret introduces the participants to a past life regression on Saturday afternoon. Margaret explains:

*People can spontaneously go into past lives during rebirths. They're laying there breathing, breathing; you ask them 'what's happening?' And they say 'I think I'm going to be hung' or 'I think I'm in medieval England'. The way you know whether or not they are real is that there is true emotion with a past life. You cannot fake a past life. You can guide people into past lives and this is useful for particularly repetitive life patterns that haven't cleared out with rebirthing. The most important thing is to get a postulate from the end of that lifetime—what decision did they make at the point of death. That will be the decision that they carry over into next lifetimes until it is exposed.*

From a rebirthing perspective, material from past lives may be carried into the present life. It is recognised that at the point of death, particularly difficult lifetimes or violent death, the decision made at that time is carried in the soul energy into subsequent reincarnations. Like the unconscious/subconscious material that is brought to the surface in rebirthing, past life decisions require exposing before they can be consciously evaluated. Through this process within rebirthing, individuals are seen to be afforded

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increasing agency as they are empowered with greater freedom of choice to enact change. As a result, these individuals are seen to be taking greater responsibility for themselves and their outcomes.

Margaret explains the sequence for the past life regression. A discussion takes place about past lives and the technique for guiding a person through the process after which the participants pair up and practice this technique on one another. The participant undergoing the regression is given the title of 'traveller', whilst the attending person is the 'guide' who also records the details of the regression. The guide talks the traveller through a guided meditation to enter into the past life. Once there, the guide maintains verbal contact with the traveller to assist in describing the past life and ultimately finding the postulate. The guide then brings them back to current location and time to complete the regression. The participants experience a range of outcomes. Several hours later and after refreshments, the participants discuss their experiences. The level of excitement in the training room is palpable. Eyes are bright and all are deeply engaged with each person as they recount their experiences. Gaylene was unable to regress into a past life and experienced a rebirth instead. Gaylene recounts her rebirth to the group.

*I went back to an incident when I was a child feeling alone and confused which is how I have spent most of my life. It's affected my life in that I need all the details so I don't make any mistakes and I have to know where I'm going before I can start.*

Margaret validates Gaylene's experience by proposing that 'in your case, it's very difficult to go to a past life because it's totally unknown; you can't just flop into a past life because it's not safe'. Gaylene lets out a chuckle and responds, 'maybe next time'. Margaret uses Gaylene's account as an illustration of one of the challenges in undertaking a past life regression. According to Margaret, this is not uncommon, particularly if the concept of past lives is new. A short discussion around Gaylene's experience takes place before Jonathon is invited to share his experience.

*I found mine a bit confusing at the start. I just got a brief glimpse of myself in a dark forest and eventually I realised I was looking for food. It was back in the 1400s in England and I was about fourteen years old. And the plague had come through and everything was gone, and I was starving and tired. But it was quite strange and I couldn't figure out if it was real or I was making it all up. Then I saw this barn in the valley and I wandered down there. I just crawled up on the dirt flagstones and that was it; I died. There wasn't any pain; there wasn't anything else. But there was a lot of that transition white light stuff. As for me, that lifetime*

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*was really hard. I was really hungry and tired. There was this huge lack of joy so my postulate was 'there is no joy for me'. And that's what I brought into this lifetime; I have to find that joy and put it back into my life.*

As Jonathon recounts his experience, his excitement is palpable. He is animated, eyes bright, his arms and hands freely expressive. After expressing initial concern as to whether he was making it up or not, Jonathon adds 'I knew it was possible but didn't expect it to be that clear'. Paul recounts his regression next.

*For me it was so fast. I can remember thinking 'nothing is going to happen.' (Paul clicks his fingers.) Then boom—I went straight back to that last rebirth where I was dying. I was lying in the field again looking at the sky, just lying there dying. I was in my early eighties and it wasn't until I died and left my body that I realised that I was black. Looking around at the farm I guess it was like mid 1800s America and I was a slave, a farm hand. The postulate was: 'I don't want to do this again' because it had been a hard life.*

*Margaret: Amazing. So you can do it easy this time, it's much more fun. (Margaret laughs.)*

Whereas Jonathon questioned the validity of his experience, Paul's doubt lay in the possibility of a regression for him. His final comment clarifies his doubt: 'I was really surprised because it did happen really and I got the sensation of where I was laying, the feeling was there.' Now it is Lily's turn.

*Oh I had a doozey. As I was going down the rainbow<sup>55</sup> I could see where I was about to head and I thought 'oh shit'. (Laughter reverberates around the room at Lily's accounting of her regression.) I landed in WW1 in Germany. I was an eighteen-year-old boy who didn't want to be there. It was just amazing like I could feel the fear in my chest and it was really intense. I was basically in no-man's land. I walked through some barbed-wire and stuff and then Robyn said 'go to the next point'. Then everything just disappeared and there was white light and I was floating and thought 'oh this is what it's like to die'. Robyn brought me back to when I was actually dying. I was lying in the mud calling out for help and nobody was coming. I was laying there in this pain and these bombs were going off and I could feel my stomach all horrible and painful—like my innards had obviously been blown out. I was basically, 'I don't want to be here; I don't want to die.' I kept calling out for my mum. The postulate was, 'I was born to suffer'. So it was pretty intense; it was wicked. (Lily chuckles.)*

Unlike Jonathon and Paul who had initial doubts about their experiences, Lily expresses no doubt and was able to slip into her past life quickly with intense sensorial and emotional embodiment as reflected in her account. This could be attributed to Lily's long-term exposure since childhood, and subsequent familiarity, to rebirthing.

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<sup>55</sup> A rainbow is one segment of the guided visualisation enabling the traveller to access the past life.

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Past life regression, within the rebirthing framework, provides a uniquely alternative way of being in the body as is evident from these accounts. Whilst an awareness of present time and embodiment is maintained, at the same time, the self as a different self from another lifetime is experienced concurrently. Spirit possession is defined by Boddy (1994:407) as 'the hold exerted over a human being by external forces or entities more powerful than she' where the possessors 'may be ancestors or divinities, ghost of foreign origin, or entities both ontologically and ethnically alien'. In contrast, the 'entity' is experienced as familiar within past life regressions; evident in the participants' identification with this alternative self and their vivid and informative embodied experiences. Each participant is able to identify themselves by gender, age and cultural background, identifying their past lives both spatially and temporally. Time becomes distorted, centuries are crossed with no concept of the passage of time. The past life is recalled similarly to any memory, the vague hint of memory gradually increasingly vivid and real with the 'fleshing out' of the details.

Past life experiences differ from spirit possession where the 'other' is an entity not of the self and entails a 'shift of responsibility...from self to Other' (Crapanzano 1985:20). In contrast, in past lives the Other is still the self at a spiritual level, yet Other in corporeal, spatial, temporal contexts. Whilst the traveller is supported to take responsibility for the decision made during that lifetime, their embodied experience of the past life is released upon returning to present time and location. Recalling the rebirthing notion of the unbounded self as an energetic being, past life regression suggests that this unboundedness extends to include alternative temporal and spatial dimensions within the space and time frame of the present. However, past life regressions resemble possession which 'creatively resituates individuals in a profoundly alienating or confusing world [and] facilitates a process of self-construction and healing that takes place on several planes at once' (Boddy 1994:422). For past lives, those planes traverse both time and place.

That Jonathon, Paul and Lily so clearly experience their regressions enables them to perceive themselves as more than their current corporeal body. By experiencing a past life, their spiritual immortality is confirmed for them, reaffirming the rebirthing understanding of immortality as the indestructible soul that exists for eternity. Within the

context of rebirthing, accessing past lives provides an opportunity for participants to question their spirituality and the capacity of the soul/spirit of the participants to access the source of any negative beliefs and values, and to interpret their experiences.

## **Cold Water Rebirthing**

A second major process is provided on this weekend for the participants to explore their spirituality. An alternative rebirth is facilitated, one in cold water rather than the usual process on a mattress. As Margaret writes in the Training Manual (Unit Eight: 15):

Cold water rebirthing is a higher gradient of rebirthing. This technique is used for those who have death issues and issues of overwhelming fear locked in the body. The principle of cold water rebirthing is the principle of body mastery and of spiritual awareness...The technique of cold water rebirthing is a slow and gradual entering of the body into cold water. As each section of the legs and torso, arms, neck, and finally the head enter the water each part is allowed to integrate the sensations of cold and transform them into warmth and energy.

Throughout the cold water rebirth, the participants are required to use conscious connected breathing to master the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual challenges presented by this highly stressful process. Margaret briefs the participants on Saturday afternoon during which she illustrates with photos of previous participants undertaking the process. One photo shows two pairs of people, each couple standing and facing each other, holding hands and looking into each other's eyes. They are submerged to their hips in the water.

*Gaylene: Oh so we're not fully submerged.*

*Margaret: you will be fully submerged by the end. It takes an hour to get up to here. (Margaret points to her neck.) It's a very slow process; you're in the water for an hour. This is body mastery and is why it's at the end of the training.*

*Robyn: Why is it called body mastery?*

*Margaret: Because you need to master the fear of things happening to your body. What happens is cold brings up fear and when you get fearful, your breathing slows down and becomes shallower; it can almost stop. You do this process in pairs, you maintain eye*

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contact. It is important to not go unconscious<sup>56</sup>; the idea is to stay in your body and keep breathing fully.

Robyn: How does the fear come out then?

Margaret: You are going to breathe the fear away; it dissipates in the water. You stand in the water holding hands with somebody, face to face, just breathing, breathing. And you are going to feel cold and the natural body process is to shiver. You might have got cold at birth or you might have felt cold in a scary situation. Then there's an instillation of fear in your body so 'cold equals fear; fear equals cold'. From past lives we associate cold with death because as the vascular system closes down in the dying process and we're not getting the blood flow, we feel cold. So during this process you're using your breath to breathe in warmth from the sun or the light or whatever it is. And as you breathe in that energy you can actually feel it because your body starts to tingle. Remember this is another gradient on top of the fear weekend. This process actually teaches you body mastery so that when you do get into a situation, whether you're so hot or you're so cold, you can handle it.

In the rebirthing model, the fear of death is represented by the sensation of 'cold' which is re-produced by sending the participants into the sea early on a winter's morning. Their goal is to focus on the conscious connected rebirthing breath which, in keeping with rebirthing concepts, eliminates the fear in their bodies. At the same time the breath enables them to draw on 'energy' to warm the body, the source being the 'sun or the light or whatever it is'. Once more, the concept of the body as constructed of energy is invoked by Margaret. The level of anxiety is evident in the questions which keep flowing. Eventually Margaret brings it to a close saying, 'I will run through the details again tomorrow morning at the beach, and remember the assistants and I will be also coaching you as you go. You will not be alone'.

However, the conditions at the beach on Sunday morning were too extreme to undergo the cold water rebirth; it is cancelled and the group drives back to Margaret's home. Margaret sends the participants into the training room to sit quietly and meditate while the assistants cook the breakfast they would have been served on the beach after the cold water rebirth. After the meditation and breakfast, the group reconvenes in the training room to talk about their experiences and responses to the postponed cold water rebirth. A mixture of relief and disappointment emerge:

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<sup>56</sup> 'Going unconscious is a mechanism used during rebirthing as a means of keeping the self safe, not wanting to feel, or not wanting to remember; the person is avoiding the intensity of the experience. It looks like falling asleep however is really a loss of conscious awareness and is common during rebirthing sessions.' (Interview with Margaret.)

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*Jonathon: I was a little apprehensive but am now disappointed that it didn't happen though my little boy bits are sort of glad. (Everyone laughs.)*

*Gaylene: I'm the same as Jonathon; I just wanted to get on with it. And now I've got to psych myself up again.*

*Robyn: I was awake before the alarm; I didn't feel panicked or anything. But then I felt churned up afterwards on the way home. In the meditation I had this real strong sense of Simon coming towards me. He was hugging me; didn't say anything. And then he backed away. So that was a bit weird.*

*Margaret: He's definitely in the space.*

*Robyn: I can feel him; he's right there.*

*Margaret: I think that most of us are probably grieving him at some level. You cannot have that much closeness with somebody without experiencing loss. He's cried with us; he's laughed with us; he's been angry with us. Being the spiritual weekend, I think that he knows he's ripping his spirit off and he just couldn't be here. He was still drinking and he wasn't changing. So there's an enormous amount of pain for him too. And he can't come back now because you've already moved forward without him. So I feel sadness about that.*

*Jonathon: Watching Simon in the warm water rebirth interacting with Paul was just so emotional and heart warming, I was really upset and angry that he dropped out.*

The absence of Simon is felt 'energetically' and emotionally by the group and is metaphorically present in Margaret's view: 'he's still here'. In this scenario, rebirthing notions of interconnectedness and intersubjectivity exist and move beyond the corporeal and spatial fields and once again, the experience of loss is felt and expressed as grief.

The connections within the group are deep and palpable. The degree of freedom of expression and action has dramatically increased and the laughter is spontaneous, frequent and hearty. I ask Margaret how much of the group dynamic she feels is influenced by the presence of Simon. She replies,

*He took a lot of space up in this training. Now he's no longer there, the others are able to fill that space with their energy.*

From a rebirthing perspective, reflecting the concept of the body energy schema, Simon's energy 'took up a lot of space'. Now that he is absent, that space becomes available for others to fill. Consequently, their relationships have a freedom of energy exchange uninterrupted or impeded by the energy of Simon. Yet at the same time, seemingly contradictory, his absence is felt as a presence. As a result, the relationships

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within the training can be seen as dynamic and always shifting, contingent on the subtle body energies emanating from each individual; that is physical, emotional, mental or spiritual. The training itself, reflects this dynamic shifting paradigm with the cold water rebirth being rescheduled for the Completion Weekend.

### **Completion: coming full circle**

Friday night is the beginning of the final weekend; the training is coming to an end. As the group gather prior to the start of the evening, there is a loud buzz as they greet each other. The session starts.

*Robyn: When I got home last time, Alan had prepared tea and he'd taped this show for me called 'Heart and Soul'. He sat there holding my hand and he said, 'I love you and I'll never leave you'. (The participants collectively sigh, Robyn giggles.)*

*Margaret: He's seen something that has touched him. So have you been going around like this?*

Margaret stretches her arms out, an indication from a rebirthing perspective that Robyn has opened her arms to 'give and receive love'.

*Robyn: Never thought of it like that. But what I have done is feel the fear and do it anyway and learnt it's not so scary. So I'm learning to apply the information I've gained. I also have mixed emotions about this coming to an end. I've had the realisation that anything's possible which I already knew but I didn't have a depth of understanding.*

*Margaret: Up here (pointing to her head) but not here (pointing to her heart.) You've now got it at a cellular level.*

*Robyn: Oh is that what it is.*

Robyn is experiencing another shift in her relationship with Alan. She is able to see changes in his behaviour, yet requires prompting from Margaret to acknowledge the changes within herself. Margaret continues to remind Robyn of her expressed reason for undertaking the training—to get in touch with her feelings by reminding her to move from her head to her heart. From a rebirthing perspective, the heart is the seat of emotional experience. Robyn, who readily admits that intellectual understanding is her habitual focus, is now able to access understanding across a wider range of her energetic bodies as a result of her experience of the rebirthing training.

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*Paul: Well my fortnight's been much quieter. My relationship to my family is significantly different and not all of them particularly like the new relationship that I have to their mini crises. They quite liked it the way it was. And also I have really mixed feelings about this weekend, not wanting to be cut free from this room.*

As Paul changes the way he relates to members of his family, he is aware of their responses to that change which they do not 'particularly like'.

*Gaylene: This has been an absolutely huge week for me. I've been in tears, mainly at all the things I know I've done wrong in the past. (Gaylene has tears in her eyes, the emotion is apparent in her voice.) And because I wasn't seen when I was little, I realised that I haven't seen people that are important to me, and I'm working through the guilt.*

*Margaret: Wind that back—you've always done the best that you've known how with the information that you had at the time. So it's really important that you don't make yourself wrong from what you've learnt.*

*Gaylene: I sort of feeling like the fledgling ready to fly but really going to miss the nest of what you people have done for me, help me do for myself. (Gaylene is teary again.) But I feel like I'm digging out of the dark, (she chuckles), almost getting to the light.*

Whilst Gaylene criticises her past behaviour, Margaret guides her to view it from a more affirming perspective. By reminding Gaylene that 'you've always done the best that you've known how', Margaret presents her with a means of accepting the choices she made in the past. The acceptance of the past as opposed to criticism, combined with personal responsibility, is not about 'getting away with things' but is about enabling people to learn from mistakes and move forward. Gaylene is able to acknowledge that she is 'digging out of the dark...almost getting to the light', enabling herself to exercise a greater degree of agency in the future. From a rebirthing perspective, As Hay<sup>57</sup> (1987:15) suggests:

Loving the self...begins with never ever criticizing ourselves for anything. Criticism locks us into the very pattern we are trying to change. Understanding and being gentle with ourselves helps us to move out of it. Remember, you have been criticizing yourself for years, and it hasn't worked. Try approving of yourself and see what happens.

Lily continues to practice speaking out.

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<sup>57</sup> Louise Hay: 'New Age metaphysician' (Johnston & Barcan 2006:26) and author, including *You Can Heal Your Life*.

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*Lily: Having a few challenges with people who don't like change but its good. Had a great birthday and this year I spoke up about what I wanted which I normally don't do. This year it's like 'this is what I want to do, this is what I want and how I'm going to do it' and it was really nice to be heard. So I'm practicing my speaking up at the moment.*

It is evident from her account that Lily's speaking up is having variable effects. Whilst she articulates her needs more clearly with positive outcomes, Lily is experiencing negative responses from others in response to the changes she has wrought.

*Jonathon: I had a good week though I've been slipping in and out of little grief moments and being teary at times. I think that I'm looking forward to the cold water rebirth tomorrow morning. Just a bit sad that it's ending.*

*Margaret: It is the beginning really; think about it like that.*

Common amongst the participants are feelings of sadness and loss at the anticipation of the end of the training. Yet at the same time the expressed excitement for the future is reinforced by Margaret who reminds them that 'it's the beginning really'. Friday night passes quickly and we all leave a little earlier because the cold water rebirth has been re-scheduled for Saturday morning.

### **Cold Water Rebirth: the coldness of death**

The cold water rebirth is the second activity to be held outside the training environment and situated within the natural world. However, unlike the ropes course where the natural environment is deemed dangerous, for the cold water rebirth the natural environment is constructed as supportive yet challenging . Whilst the high-ropes course is held half-way through the training, the cold water rebirth is effectively the last experiential learning experience for the participants. They are emerging from the spatial safety of the training environment and highly anxious about this challenging experience—one that will challenge them on all levels; physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. This activity is the culmination of the training and requires them to draw on all they have learnt, including the key themes of rebirthing: thought is creative, self as a spiritual being, and holistic health and nature.

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Furthermore, their relationship to themselves is a key factor. Whereas in the trees they were supported and coached by a team of people, it is essential for them to become their own coaches in this exercise. Though they are in pairs and can provide some basic support for each other, they are coached to keep verbal communication to a minimum. In the final analysis they are required to draw on their own internal resources: managing their internal dialogue; using the breath to convert the sensation of cold into warmth; experiencing the spiritual nature of themselves as part of a greater whole. The ultimate goal, which is body mastery, within rebirthing contexts is aligned to the notion of holistic health. Nature's role is reinforced by undertaking the cold water rebirth in the ocean rather than an alternative venue such as a cold swimming pool. Margaret tells me: 'I've done it in a pool and it's nowhere as effective. There is something very spiritual about doing the cold water rebirth at the beach with the salt water, the sand, the sun. It's about connecting with the wonder of the universe really.'

We all arrive at the beach. It is September—the morning is chilly and it is still dark. However, with street lighting we are able to unpack the cars and carry our necessities through the sand dunes and down to the beach. There is minimal talking—a few words organising to carry equipment to the beach, the participants contained within their own thoughts. The conditions are perfect. Margaret had instructed the participants to wear their swimmers under extra layers of clothing. Most wear some kind of water or plastic shoe. A range of long-sleeved tops are worn and a layer of track pants and warm tops complete the ensembles. After laying out their towels and dry clothing to put on after the rebirth, Margaret gathers the participants and assistants together in a circular huddle on the sand to review the process they're about to undertake.

As Margaret reminds them,

*Cold water rebirthing is left to the end as it is such a high gradient of rebirthing. So this is about body mastery and spiritual awareness. So as we stand here at the water's edge, take in the concept of the healing power of the water.*

Margaret invokes the notion of the healing qualities of nature. As I glance around the group's ghostly faces in the predawn light, trepidation and fear are mirrored in each. Margaret continues,

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*When you're ready to start, with your partner you are to face each other and make eye contact. You must maintain eye contact continuously throughout the whole process until you are ready to bob under the water. And it is most important that your breathing throughout the process is kept full and connected. If anyone goes unconscious, they will lose the ability to stay with the process and achieve the desired result—so you are there to support one another to remain conscious throughout the whole process. Do not hold tension in your body. Use your out-breath to release any tension. Remember, slowly is holy; this is a spiritual process. You must enter the water slowly breathing and assimilating warm sensations into the cold part of your body. As you master your body, converting cold to warm, you may have slight tingling and rushes of energy through your body.*

Margaret writes in the Participant Manual:

Fear of death and past life memories can be triggered in the body at this stage of the session and need to be processed by the rebirther in the appropriate fashion. Body sensations can be very strong.

As the sun begins to rise, the participants enter the water. Robyn is paired up with Gaylene, Jonathon and Paul partner each other and Sam steps in for Simon as a co-rebirthee for Lily.



Plate 7: Starting the cold water rebirth

Robyn finds it difficult to move into the water; she yelps, stamping her feet and looking toward us on the shore for direction. Margaret coaches her from a distance. The other two couples are fully focussed, maintaining eye contact and breathing. Lily and Sam move quickly into the water, Paul and Jonathon more slowly. Robyn and Gaylene are so

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tentative that the tide recedes at the same rate they are attempting to enter the water. Margaret continues to coach, Robyn in particular, urging both women to enter the water faster to stay ahead of the receding tide.



Plate 8: Moving into the water

Within the hour, there is a squeal and Lily has ducked under the water. Sam also goes under. Shortly after, the two men are fully submerged. Lily and Sam play in the water for a while whereas Jonathon and Paul emerge soon after submersion. It takes another half hour for Robyn and Gaylene to complete their cold water rebirths with full immersion in the water. Meanwhile the sun has risen and by the time the participants start emerging from the sea, the sunshine is flooding the beach somewhat ameliorating the brisk coolness of the air. As the participants emerge, assistants grab towels, meeting them at the water's edge, wrapping them and assisting them to dress in their dry clothes. Meanwhile, Margaret has boiled the billy and is cooking eggs, vegetarian bacon strips, tomatoes, and toast for breakfast. It takes time for several of the participants to fully warm up after their experience. When breakfast is completed, the whole group has a walk along the beach. The mood is light and free. Some walk in bunches chatting and laughing. Several people prefer to walk in solitude, deep within their own thoughts. We all pack up and the participants head home for showers after which we meet again back at Margaret's home, starting the day with a discussion about the cold water rebirth.

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*Jonathon: I feel tired but there's a sort of calmness there. I found it difficult to get focussed and I was quite cold. And then my brain started thinking 'oh God I'm not going to be able to do this' and the other half of my brain was saying 'just breathe; there's no reason why you can't do this'. So it was difficult getting into it. When I realise the benefit I'll let you know. But it wasn't as bad as I thought. My chest was my cold spot whereas my little bits were fine. So that bubble wrap under the bathing suit worked. (The group cheered and hooted at Jonathon's last comment.)*

Jonathon's subjective experience is dual in nature. His relationship with himself vacillates as he battles his conversation within his 'brain'.

*Paul: I am really trying to understand why and querying the benefits; I need to think about it more. It was really powerful to breathe through because at times the extremities, like the nuts and the toes, were so cold, to breathe into those areas and overcome that pain was easier than I thought it would be. I don't think it was a spiritual experience for me. For me it was about the mastery of dealing with physical pain.*

*Margaret: So what part of you let go of the pain? If you're breathing into the pain in your body, what part of you actually let go of the pain?*

*Paul: I don't know.*

*Margaret: You might like to consider that it actually was your spirit that was doing the work for you. (Margaret lets out a chuckle.) All healing comes from spiritual healing. So if you're breathing into a particular pain, pain is resistance caused by fear; so if you let go of the fear, there is only love now. And by breathing into the parts of you that are pain, it is actually spirit that is healing you of that pain.*

In a later interview Paul reinforces his experience of the cold water rebirth.

*I was personally amazed by my ability to breathe through that. I honestly thought that I would freeze through that process and that I would despise it. My meditation practice is all about calming the monkey mind really so maybe I don't let myself explore spirituality as much as I could.*

That all healing is spiritual is deeply embedded within rebirthing discourse which will be addressed shortly. The spiritual nature of the experience emerges through the accounts of the next participants.

*Sam: I relaxed into it a lot easier than last time; just focussing on my breath and I got really warm. The warmth kind of started in my goolies and then started going up. Driving back here, all I could think of was how bloody beautiful the warehouses were; everything was beautiful. (Sam laughs and the group joins in.) The last time that I did the cold water rebirth was when I accepted that there was a God and stuff like that. It was just unreal, that amazing bliss, getting really deep into my heart and I just want to be with.*

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*Lily: At first, when the initial shock hit, I was fine. Then I was getting really cold so I was practicing the breathing, concentrating on the breathing because the head talk started to really get going. Once the water got up to my neck I had this huge heat coming out of my belly it was really phenomenal. It's very interesting to know that if you're physically cold, your spirit doesn't have to accept that. So I'm just sort of chilling; it was a lovely experience.*

*Gaylene: I feel a bit tired too but just so clear in the mind. I just found the experience amazing in its simplicity. I couldn't believe how easy it was for me to keep warm because I'm a naturally very cold person. I just feel a huge connectedness with the ocean and the sun as it came up, and just the whole universe; me being an insignificant part of that, feeling small, but at the same time feeling really big because that's also me. It was an amazing experience. (Gaylene beams as she speaks.)*

I speak with Gaylene later:

*Margaret said the ocean is just a distraction. It's amazing just how many things in life are distractions. I've been using that idea a lot since then; like if I get a bit of a headache 'oh that's just a distraction', or I don't feel like doing something 'oh that's just a distraction', or I still get panicked in some situations—'no, that's just a distraction'. And it's amazing how it just clears mentally and physically, clears away so much rubbish.*

Robyn reports her experience.

*I found it difficult. My feet were like blocks of ice and I sort of wafled in and out. I would warm up and think 'be calm,' and then I'd lose it. I had to resist strongly the temptation of just getting out. I didn't like the sensations, didn't like the seaweed around me. And then I started to get lower back ache. I did breathing and then that went. Then as I got deeper I felt like I had a steel rod up my insides. So breathed into it and eventually that went. So I just struggled with concentrating and the only thing that kept me there was Gaylene's stability. She was like this magnificent person. She sees strength in me, but I see it in her. The end was great; going under the water and then swimming and laying on my back and the sun was shining on me; euphoric—like total freedom.*

Whilst Robyn had to continually battle with her capacity to override the distractions and focus on her breathing, at the same time she was able to indirectly draw on Gaylene's strength and stability as an inspiration.

It is evident from these accounts that the participants had six quite individual experiences of the cold water rebirth. However, within their narratives central themes emerged: the embodied experience and the spiritual component.

All the participants except Sam, who had previously undertaken a cold water rebirth, were highly anxious about the cold water rebirth. Foremost in their accounts was fear of

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the cold. Whilst Jonathon had anticipated the coldness to impact on his genitals, it was his chest that felt the cold. Paul identified his extremities: 'like the nuts and the toes were so cold'. Robyn also struggled with the cold and a range of sensations in her body 'which Robyn didn't like'. However, for the other three participants, the focus was on the heat that their bodies produced. Lily was able to describe heat emanating from her abdomen after the shock of the initial cold. Sam experienced warmth starting in his testicles and moving up through his body. Gaylene expressed amazement at how warm she was despite her perception of being a 'cold person'.

Whilst most were wary and anticipating a struggle, there was much surprise from those who found the cold water rebirth easier than anticipated. Their ability to focus and use the conscious connected breathing had an impact on the outcome. Lily initially was cold until she was able to fully focus on her breathing, which required overriding her 'head talk'. Whilst Robyn reports 'struggled with concentrating', when she successfully engaged with the conscious connected breath, Robyn realised that her uncomfortable sensations disappeared. Jonathon found it 'difficult to get into it' and battled to focus and maintain attention on his breathing, eventually claiming that it 'wasn't as bad' as he had anticipated. Paul found that using the breath to overcome pain, rather than cold, was powerful and 'easier than [he] thought it would be'. Gaylene found it easy, 'amazing in its simplicity', as did Sam.

These accounts relate to the first aim of the cold water rebirth—body mastery; the ability to transform bodily experience from one of discomfort to comfort. To varying degrees the participants achieved this whether it was cold to warm for Lily and Gaylene, discomfort to euphoria for Robyn, or alleviating pain for Paul. From his previous experience, Sam found it much easier to relax and focus on producing warmth in his body. From the above accounts, the degree to which the participants managed their discomfort as they entered the ocean appears to be determined by their ability to concentrate on, and maintain, the conscious connected breath.

Experiencing their own spirituality is a second aim of the cold water rebirth. Sam describes his spiritual experience as 'amazing bliss'. Lily realises the power of spirit in not accepting the reality of the physical. For her 'it was a lovely experience'. Gaylene

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describes her connection with ‘the whole universe’ and Robyn, after a long struggle, found going under the water and floating around with the sun shining on her ‘euphoric...That was like total freedom’. In contrast Jonathon and Paul, as partners in the process, both expressed a need for time to think about their experiences. Later Paul proposes that, ‘I don’t think it was a spiritual experience for me’. Margaret responds by inviting Paul to ‘consider that it actually was your spirit that was doing the work for you...All healing comes from spiritual healing at the end of the day’. Spirit and spirituality, and their impact on healing, are core to rebirthing discourse (Leonard & Laut 1983:24; Minett 2007; Morningstar 1994:124-125). Tacey (2003:52) writes in *The Spiritual Revolution*:

The *Tao Te Ching* warns that spiritual water flows ‘in places men reject’. We do not understand the logic or meaning of this deeper reality, and are apparently unable to appreciate the extent to which our lives are dependent on the invisible currents that flow beneath our lives, and between ourselves and other lives. We are largely ignorant of the role of spirit in sustaining and nurturing us.

I ask Margaret during a private interview what she meant by ‘all healing comes from spiritual healing’. She answers,

*What is it that causes healing within the body? Nobody or nothing can heal you. A doctor can put a plaster on your broken leg, however it is the body that does the healing. The body is inspired to mend itself and this is a spiritual process. It is through the body/mind/spirit connection that the body is restored back to its original fully functioning state.*

Margaret’s premise of the spiritual nature of healing can also be seen in Schlitz & Harman’s (2001:189) proposal that:

many alternative epistemologies involve a worldview in which human experience — including thoughts, feelings, and intentions — is believed to interact in causal ways with subtle forms of ‘energies’, ‘forces’, or ‘spirits’ to create a healing response.

The implication of the spiritual nature of healing is of the individual as an empowered agent within this process. As such, the individual is required to be personally responsible for their own healing. Explicit in Margaret’s construction of the cold water rebirth is the concept of personal responsibility.

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From a rebirthing perspective, as the cold water rebirth progresses, it is the expanding subtle body energy incorporating the greater environment—the sun, the ocean—that eventually enables the individual to experience ‘bliss,’ ‘euphoria,’ ‘a lovely experience,’ ‘a huge connectedness with...just the whole universe’ as experienced by Sam, Robyn, Gaylene and Lily. The ‘intersubjective, creative and open’ subject, as posed by Johnston (2008:2), has expanded beyond the restrictive limits of the corporeal body to embrace not only their partners, but also the wider universe.

Rather than Margaret defining spirituality, she allows the participants to have an experience of their spiritual connection though the ‘conceptualisation of a subtle subjectivity [that] necessitates a radical re-negotiation of the dualism at the heart of dominant Western discourse: self—divine (spirit); mind—body; reason—emotion; I—Other’ (ibid.:2). Relationships are transformed through this process; the dual nature of beings become symbolically reflected in the faces of their partners. Whilst the participants are primarily in relationship with themselves, concurrently they are in relationship with the Other and ultimately in relationship with the ‘universe’. Johnston (2008:2) summarises this stance as a ‘conceptualisation of subjectivity as relation: a dynamic relation that does not erase individuality’.

The cold water rebirth is the final experiential learning process of the training. Through this exercise, the participants are required to take full responsibility for their process and outcomes. Their ability to remain fully embodied, engaged with the sensations within their body and the emotions that they are experiencing and their ability to focus on the conscious connected breathing cycle determines their experience of transformation—the transformation of cold to warm, and the elimination of other uncomfortable body sensations. In doing so, personhood within rebirthing practice is revealed, one who has greater agency through body mastery. This capacity is then seen to be available for other aspects of their lives—not only mastering heat or cold, but also pain or discomfort which may physical, emotional, mental or spiritual in nature. This process is understood to be spiritual within rebirthing, reflecting the concept that everything is connected, both relationally and spatially. The transformative experiences of the cold water rebirth, whether embodied sensation or conceptions of the self, are symbolic of the transformations that they are enacting within themselves and their lives.

## **Completion day: love and acceptance**

On the morning of the last day, Margaret sets up an opportunity for people to stand before each other, maintaining eye contact, holding hands. As they move from one to another, the words each person speaks to each and every person in the room are:

'As a fellow traveller you have been my companion, thank you for hearing me.'

'You have been my rebirther, thank you for helping me to heal.'

'You have loved and trusted me; you will always be in my heart.'

As I participate in this activity, my body is pulsating with energy; my heart is full of love. As I move from one person to another, I can feel the energy between us subtly change as my relationship with each person is subtly different. I am overwhelmed with gratitude for the trust these people have for me, and their willingness to be subjects for my research. Their individual journeys have been emotionally and intellectually challenging much of the time. Yet today the trust and love within the group is palpable—the 'unconditional love' to which Margaret has referred frequently throughout the training. As Margaret points out: 'They're not only feeling all that love and acceptance for each other, but most importantly they are feeling it for themselves. With that self-love, they know they deserve to have great lives and great relationships.' The uncertainty and fear with which the participants entered the training on that first night have been replaced by a new sense of self, one that is anticipating the future with excitement and a new strength.

The participants then talk about their feelings about the upcoming completion of the training.

*Jonathon: I've just realised that I'm feeling really good. I know that today's the last day and I'm sad but I know the journey for me is just going to become so much more amazing and everybody here is such a part of it; it's just so exciting.*

*Gaylene: I slept really well until I woke up at daybreak and couldn't go back to sleep because I had a big smile on my face like back in the ocean. (Gaylene laughs.) It's such a glorious weekend to finish on though I do feel really emotionally up and down.*

*Paul: I received the most amazing gift last night at home. My partner had gone to so much effort to create a beautiful nurturing space for me. It was just the most beautiful time together that I think has happened in the last few years really.*

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*Margaret: Yes, and healing on all levels and a deep recognition of you and your journey too. And thank you for sharing that with us; it's very heart-warming.*

*Lily: I haven't had such a good sleep in a very long time. For me it's ending. I know it's not the end but still is sad for me. I've loved spending time with everyone and being in this space.*

*Robyn: I had a good sleep last night. I feel really happy and satisfied with the course and being with you all. And after yesterday, I want you to know that my heart is with everyone of you. The past patterns that have been there are strong and it is just another learning process for me. The reason I'm saying this is because, in the past, people view me as being cold. But it's there and I just want you to know that.*

As Robyn speaks, the people in the room respond to her honesty and openness. There is a sense of vulnerability around Robyn and people respond to her with tenderness. Margaret responds to their comments.

*At this time, all present are feeling a great deal of sadness; it is the last day of the course. Many people have never had an environment where they have been so unconditionally loved and supported. The thought of this can be overwhelming.*

The final sessions of the morning include setting goals for the future, starting your own rebirthing business, the various organisations within the rebirthing/breathwork community: local, national and international, and ongoing support. After a final shared lunch, the participants are sent for a walk while Margaret and the assistants prepare the training room for the final process, blessings, acknowledgements and finish. Fresh flowers are arranged in abundance, many tea light candles are set up around the room. All paraphernalia of teaching and the chairs, bar one, are removed. This chair stands against a wall and is draped with a beautifully patterned cloth. Towels are stacked to one side, and cushions placed on the floor in a semi-circle in front of the chair.

I elected not to record or make any field notes of these last few hours. In honour of the incredible generosity of my informants and the privilege of documenting the most intimate details of their private lives, I decided to fully participate in the process without any distractions. The reverence with which the first part was undertaken was truly within the spiritual realm. With classical music playing in the background, one by one the participants were brought into the room to have their feet washed by Margaret in warm fragrantly oiled water in which were floating flowers and petals; possibly evoking images

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of Christ washing the feet of his disciples. Finally, every member of the group was acknowledged in this manner and they were all seated on cushions.

Margaret asks the group: 'What was that process all about and why do you think that I did that?' A discussion takes place which includes references to Jesus. Margaret explains. 'I do it to debunk the Guru syndrome. We are all equal; we are all on a journey. I just got started on this path before you did. That is the only difference between you and me.' As Margaret recounts to me in a later interview, 'I need them to realise that I honour them for their courage on this part of their journeys and that I am no better than them.'

Whilst the participants have a refreshment break, the assistants replace the covered chair with a sofa. At the commencement of the training, all members of the group were instructed to think about and start creating small gifts for each of the other members. By the final day of the training a personal written acknowledgement is to be attached to each of these gifts which are to be brought on the last day, the acknowledgement being a personal missive to the individual communicating the contribution of that person to the scribe's experience of the training. As the final session is about to begin, all members of the group are asked to bring their gifts and acknowledgements into the training room. They all sit on the cushions in front of the sofa.

In this second part of the completion ceremony, one by one each individual, starting with the participants and then the assistants, is invited to sit with Margaret on the couch where they receive verbal acknowledgements from every other person present. The gift each one of us had prepared, with the written testimonial, is then handed to the recipient who then sits down on the cushions with their unopened treasures to participate in the next person's reception. The last to be acknowledged is Margaret herself with Zoe, one of the assistants, sitting with her on the couch. Many tears are shed, joy and laughter abound and the love in the room is palpable. It is impossible to describe that last afternoon. In fact, the participants in a final interview also had the same experience.

*Jonathon: I was just teary all day partly because it was ending but also just from the joyousness of surviving the nine months. (Jonathon chuckles.) It was just so joyous; sharing our presents and our acknowledgements. These people have become my family that I know I will have forever; just that closeness and the bonding that happened.*

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*Lily: Sitting up on the sofa and taking the acknowledgements in was beautiful as well. It was so nice to hear from people what they got out of our friendship or relationship and it was so nice to be able to express to people how I felt; thinking about how each individual affected my process and how the course went for me, I loved all of it; it was a brilliant weekend. The next morning I was as high as a kite. I was just floating on a cloud, it was wonderful. (Lily laughs to herself.)*

*Robyn: The last day was like truth day for me; like this is it. This is the finale. Then when I sat on the couch with Margaret, all the stuff that I hadn't written in the acknowledgements just poured out. I've never received so many beautiful gifts; and the thoughts that went into them. And for two days, I just felt so loved and cherished and so honoured, that I just wanted to savour that forever. I couldn't go outside the house; I couldn't go to work, couldn't function, nothing. (Robyn chuckles.) I was in bliss for two days.*

*Gaylene: I thought I would be really sad when the course finished and I didn't know how I was going to leave without being an absolutely sobbing emotional mess. But because we had a chance to say what we felt, it just felt so complete. And walking into that room with everybody else in there...Margaret says that the room is full of love and I know it now; it was like this thick vapour in the room when I walked in. It was just amazing. And I was actually really pleased with how receptive I was to taking in the acknowledgements; it was a really lovely process. Just all the hugs and all the love.*

*Paul: The last process will live long in the memory because it was just so powerful. It wasn't saying goodbye to people but certainly was a full stop on the group thing. There was a huge amount of sadness about that and excitement that this is now done and there's something else around the corner. We will always stay connected because of what we said in front of each other and witnessed of each other. It's not something that happens very often in your life.*

This final ceremony takes place at the end of a nine-month rite of passage. As the participants transition from the training space to be wholly incorporated back into their lives, Margaret exhorts them to continue the process of change outside the safety of the liminal space. As Turner (1969:95) reflects 'liminality is frequently likened to...being in the womb'. This moment of reincorporation may be seen as a 're-birth' after nine months of gestation.

## Conclusion

The training weekend titled God, Death and Immortality has been analysed, starting with concepts of God being explored and challenged, revealing both notions of God from the traditional Christian perspective to one of 'God is love'. Samuel (2005:331) proposes, 'Western science leaves many things unexplained [such as] [s]pontaneous meditative experiences, self-taught understandings of the internal energy processes of the mind-

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body complex, and unexplained memories of apparent past lives,' all of which are central assumptions of rebirthing. As such 'perceptions of past lives, reincarnation and interconnectedness' (Bowman 2000b:86) were explored through a past life regression. This regression, which reinforced rebirthing's alternative view of death—that of spiritual immortality—also 'challenges assumptions...that our lifecourse ends in inevitable, irrevocable death' (Zivkovic 2010:172). The experiences of the participants, of themselves in present time and, at the same time, an alternative self physically, culturally, temporally and spatially, reaffirm Boddy's (1994:411) suggestion that 'the body is both the existential ground of belief and the locus of engagement with the spirit world'.

A personalised experience for the participants of agency through body mastery was facilitated through the cold water rebirth. That a 'genuinely postmodern spirituality....needs a new language and a new imagining' (Tacey 2003:60) was reflected in the experiences of the participants throughout this chapter, whether while attempting to define God, or exploring their relationship with their own spirituality through the past life regression and the cold water rebirth.

The final day of the training was one of completion, and of transition into the next stage of their lives. A completion ceremony where Margaret washed the feet of all present reaffirmed the equal status of all present. The giving and receiving of presents and acknowledgements, both verbal and written, finalised the nine months of transformation. Margaret reminded the participants,

*Just remember you've been on an incredible journey. Don't ever forget how you started this journey, and remember that your spirit brought you here, and you've been brought together, as a special band of souls, to come here and learn together, be together, heal together, grow together. So before we get to acknowledge each other this afternoon, I want you to acknowledge yourself, for the courage it took to be here, the courage it took to persist with your journey, the courage to have to face all these topics, and parts of your lives, and tell yourself the truth. And now look at you, shining little lights, giving yourselves such amazing opportunities to go out and be different, live differently, and live with all these new attributes that you have as a result of being here.*

## Conclusion: the completed cycle

*It's been great. I feel so different after the nine months. I just feel like I'm striding into my life, instead of waiting for it to come to me. I'm feeling stronger in my body and my energy's much better. I've learned a heck of a lot and I just feel like I'm flying at the moment; it's great. I really feel I have the tools to claim my life back. I've spent twenty five years in my old job and now it's time for me and it makes me feel just so good. The challenges are there and I know I still have a way to go with the fear and the apprehension and all that stuff, but it's mine. And I just want to embrace it and just run with it now. I've been so afraid of stepping into my own power, really, and trusting. I've being reborn literally. I feel like I have that inner strength and so much more knowledge. I just feel so clear and happy, and the course has helped to really empower me. I know I'm heading in the right direction and it just feels so right to me. It's fantastic.*

This is the way Jonathon described his rebirthing training experience. At the commencement of the training, Jonathon depicted himself as a 'shy naïve little Jewish Buddhist gay person'. His intention for undertaking the rebirthing training was to 'be clear' for his Reiki clients. Jonathon was also able to articulate the effect of an angry father and an overprotective mother on his sense of self and subsequent behaviours. After the finish of the training, the shift in Jonathon's sense of self was evident, expressing a confidence in himself and his future that was absent in the initial interview. The embodiment of self was also apparent in this account; with 'inner strength' and feeling 'so clear and happy,' Jonathon stated: 'I now have the tools to claim my life back.'

The rebirthing training commenced with Conception and Birth, and was brought to a close with Death and Immortality—the full life cycle. Within the rebirthing model, the notion of immortality through reincarnation has provided the opportunity for this cycle to repeat itself through a series of 'rebirths'. In a similar fashion, the training itself came to completion, and like death, signalled the completion of this particular part of the participants' lives. They were then presented with the opportunity to return 'reborn' to their personal lives, starting a new cycle. The course of the training reflected the rebirthing perception of life consisting of a series of little deaths, letting go and starting afresh—a rebirth, with infinite opportunities for this to occur, not only in a cosmological sense but also on a regular basis throughout one's life.

## The process of personal transformation

This thesis traced the personal journeys of six people as they underwent a process of transformation, one which they had elected to be facilitated by rebirthing. Each participant came with their own history and their own particular reasons for desiring change in their lives. The training was designed to give each participant the maximum opportunity to realise these individual goals. To do so required the participants to confront and review their lives and their behaviours, and to make choices to facilitate change in their lives. This thesis was undertaken to demonstrate and analyse particular notions of personhood, embodiment and emotion, implicit and explicit, within rebirthing as the participants undertook the nine-month's training. By reviewing their original intentions for undertaking the rebirthing training and then reflecting on their final comments in the exiting interviews, a picture of their personal transformational experiences and their visions for their futures emerged. In the process, the original research questions were addressed. The impact of rebirthing on notions of personhood became evident as did the role of embodiment and emotion in the construction and reconstruction of personhood.

Gaylene started the rebirthing training 'not being happy with the old me and not quite knowing what the new me's going to be'. Fear was a primary emotion, one that had been with Gaylene 'since birth'. Gaylene reported a loss of confidence in her own ability to speak up, and a need to avoid getting too close to people. A major shift occurred for Gaylene through the confrontation of her fear of heights during the high-ropes course that she revealed in our final interview together.

*I notice what I would call subtle but significant changes like being a lot more relaxed in myself and being able to take things as they come. I'm sleeping a heck of a lot better because I haven't got all that stuff churning around in my head; stuff that I was powerless to do anything about. Just letting go, unburdening myself which is lovely. And I do flow with things a lot better. I'm certainly sending out a lot more love. I didn't know it but at the beginning of the course, my heart was like a stone, just really cold and rigid whereas now it's open and flowing, with blood as well as love. In a sense I don't try and intellectualise things as much as I used to which is a big shift in thinking for somebody like me. And there's a huge change in my spirit, realising that's the part of me that I've been seeking for so long. (Saying this, tears well up in Gaylene's eyes.) It's taken all this time to find it. It's like my whole life has been capped and now I can let it out and be me. I want to do something where I can make a difference to other people's lives in a spiritual way. I'm not too sure what that looks like yet; I just need to keep focussing on the positive and learning and growing as much as I can.*

From 'being totally worn out' at the commencement of the training and expressing a lack of direction in her life, Gaylene now viewed her future in a more positive light, a potential despite the course of this future remaining a mystery. However this was no longer seen as a problem as Gaylene was learning to 'flow with things a lot better'. Gaylene's perception of herself was described bodily: 'more relaxed', her heart 'open and flowing', and she reflected on the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of herself.

Old patterns and the difficulties negotiating a new relationship were issues identified by Lily in the first interview. Being 'a sort of creation of everyone else's personalities and lives' were highlighted as barriers to 'finding myself and what I want and who I am and what my goals are' for Lily. Having a long connection to rebirthing through her parents and her own experiences of rebirthing, Lily reported,

*For me the best part was having the regular rebirths. It's a brilliant course and I'd do it again in a heartbeat. Just that regular contact with people who are going through the same thing and wanting to learn the same things as myself was good as well. The main things I learnt about myself were my codependent habits and behaviours that I didn't know about—being reliant on other people's approval. I'm also looking at things from other people's perspectives and taking on new ideas before making judgements. They're probably the main things I came out with in the end.*

Lily spent much time challenging herself to speak up, both within and without the training space. This included renegotiating her relationship within her marriage. By challenging her fear of upsetting other people, Lily was constantly surprised with the responses she received, particularly her own internal responses.

Paul commenced the rebirthing training describing himself as a 'social isolate'. A 'series of monsters from my childhood', coupled with a challenging relationship with his father due to his homosexuality and political beliefs were identified as major issues in his initial interview. The sexual abuse from within the church precipitated Paul's closing down emotionally, and 'los[ing] sight of who I was'. In his final interview, Paul confided,

*I've been able to identify some of the emotional blocks from the past, things that I felt like I'd dealt with something and moved on from it when in actual fact I hadn't. Probably, without doubt, the biggest thing for me was putting to rest the class action; that was really difficult to do. We all go through periods where we're feeling down or dark, and I suspect now, those periods won't last as long. I can piss it off and deal with it much quicker than I used to. It's made me be more outspoken in my relationships with people; not only with my significant*

## 9 Conclusion: the full cycle

*relationship, but with my family. And I used to downplay the intuitive part of me, the spiritual part of me and I'm in the process now of learning to embrace that, or understand that, or explore that. Look it got me out of being a social isolate—I'd emotionally closed down really. I look back at that now and I just cringe that I put myself through that. But that's okay in hindsight. I'm feeling sad that the course is over and I'm in a position of not knowing where I'm going to go next. Everything feels different. For the first time in my life, there are some days I'm quite happy to not leave the house. I'm reading, I'm doing things, I'm just active or I'm meditating. I know I don't want to go back to my old career. I go through periods where 'I can do this'. And then I do go through periods of doubt; yeah not sure. That's just where I am at the moment.*

Paul also articulated a common recurring theme: feeling positive about the future and anticipating change, yet not knowing what that change was going to be. Being able to put 'to rest the class action' was nominated as the most valued outcome for Paul. He also articulated changes in his relationships, including his spiritual relationship within himself, as significant results. The questioning of the spiritual experience of the cold water rebirth could be seen to influence Paul's spiritual outcome. In his account, Paul identified a contrast between the social isolation he experienced prior to the training to his current experiences of being alone and comfortable; space in which 'I'm reading, I'm doing things, I'm just active or I'm meditating'.

Prior to the training, Robyn articulated a personal identity that reflected the traditional roles demonstrated by her parents. Her prior experiences of rebirthing had given her a glimpse of the possibilities for her; the 'impact[] on my life which is my thinking, my attitude, my willingness to do different things'. Robyn was also aware of experiencing limitations due to 'pent-up fear or emotion or past experiences' and was unsure of her future, work or otherwise. Post-training Robyn shared with me.

*I've learnt to trust a bit more; trust the universe that I can do it easy. I don't have to do it hard. So that's been a big, big learning curve as well. And for me, stepping out of my comfort zone has always had a bit of anxiety around it. (Robyn laughs.) And my thing for going to the course was to have the self confidence to be able to step out and get different outcomes. I'm really excited and feel good about the future; positive about what I'm going to do and the changes that I'd like to implement now that I have the tools and the confidence to do that. The future, that's an unknown. What I've decided at the moment is that I'm going to keep moving forward and have a go at different things. People always used to say to me, 'Do whatever makes your heart sing' and I used to say, 'I don't know what makes my heart sing'. So now I need to find out what makes my heart sing.*

Robyn's enthusiasm for the future was palpable in her account. Challenging herself throughout the training was extremely uncomfortable for Robyn, as evident in the high-

ropes course. However, this training enabled Robyn to foresee an alternative future for herself, one that will emerge and evolve as she continues to explore different options. The final weekend was also significant for Robyn, not only the giving and receiving of presents and acknowledgements, but also the depth of love she experienced.

Simon's goal for rebirthing training was to give up drinking. He had embarked on a new course in his life, namely starting university. Simon also added: 'I'd locked up my past and I was getting mad at doing the same old things. I wanted some more serious change in my life and it's different doing it with a group.' However, each weekend he arrived on the Friday night in varying degrees of intoxication, angry and brooding. Gradually over the course of each weekend, this attitude would lift until, by the Sunday night, Simon would leave the training enthusiastic about his experiences, in particular, the rebirthing sessions. As Margaret pointed out to Simon on the Money weekend: 'I get a sense that between rebirthing weekends, you start drinking more, and then by the end of these weekends you're aware enough to say to yourself 'Well I'm not going to do this anymore'. But then it wears off again during the next month'.

Despite his initial purpose for undertaking the rebirthing training, Simon was unable to stop drinking. As he admitted: 'for a lot of my mates, it's like I'm rejecting them. And then when I start drinking I don't even notice its happening.' At a later stage during the training Simon declared: 'I can't see myself giving up drinking.' Without communicating his intention, Simon dropped out of the course. As Margaret postulated, 'Being the spiritual weekend, I think that he knows he's ripping his spirit off and he just couldn't be here. He was still drinking and he wasn't changing.'

Barcan (2009:211, italics in original) proposes that:

[t]he ultimate claim of the New Age movement is...the dawning of a new consciousness that will result in a new era of harmony. This transformation...can come about only through the transformation of the *self*, through a shift in individual consciousness.

Rebirthing, one of the original breathwork modalities, emerged from the New Age movement as a means of achieving this 'shift in individual consciousness' through personal transformation. The informants of my fieldwork, a nine-month rebirthing

training, all articulated the desire for change in their lives. The entirely subjective nature of this transformation relies on a particular view of personhood within rebirthing discourse—one that is self-aware, reflexive and flexible, and, thus, amenable to this process of change, best described by Smith (2012:1) as ‘porous’.

As I proposed in my introductory chapter, this thesis has analysed the transformational process of rebirthing. By following the journeys of the participants through the training, the gradual unfolding of individualised subjective and interrelational experiences illuminated this process of self-awareness and change. Initial interviews were conducted in which the participants articulated certain outcomes for themselves—the correlations between goals and outcomes related in the first section of this chapter. In Chapter Two, I explored rebirthing assumptions about personhood, embodiment and emotion—the key analytical tools for the thesis. As the participants entered the training with high levels of fear and anxiety, safety within the training space was created, spatially and temporally, to alleviate this heightened emotional tension (Chapter Three). Primary to the rebirthing training were the sessions in which the participants learnt to rebirth each other. Each rebirthing session, an hour of conscious connected breathing coupled with total relaxation, required the rebirthees to focus on somatic and emotional sensations/experiences. It was through this embodied experience that the embodiment of previous experiences was accessed, assessed and transformed to facilitate a more positive attitude for, and a greater degree of agency in, the future. In Chapter Four, an alternative body to the biomedical body was presented; one that has been embraced by the rebirthing community—a body constructed of energy and one that energetically exceeds the corporeal body. As such, the body energy schema model posited the ‘individual as intimately interrelated with his/her environment, as the boundaries of self are not clear-cut and are understood to extend elusively beyond the corporeal boundary’ (Johnston & Barcan 2006:34). This model accounted for a ‘space’ between people, a space that was radically altered. No longer an empty space, it was a space that was occupied by loosely bound energetic fields, and assisted the participants in their accounts of their experiences both within the rebirthing sessions and within their relationships. The energy body schema, coupled with the tenet of the ‘self as a spiritual being,’ the self as a reincarnated being, presupposed particular notions of memory as the participants accessed conception and birth memories. Childhood experiences of

family and the education system, in Chapter Five, provided further opportunities for the participants to reframe childhood experiences, granting them a greater degree of agency. As such, rebirthing provided a:

framework for seeing the body as agent in, and locus of intersection of, both an individual psychological order and a social order, as well as for seeing the body as both a biological being and a conscious, experiencing, acting, interpreting entity. (Lyon & Barbalet 1994:63)

The embodiment of emotion was explored in Chapter Six. Through the challenge of a high-ropes course, the participants embodied fear and, through the trust and support of their fellow participants, they had an opportunity to confront and move through their fear. The conflict between control and letting go became evident. At this point of the training, the participants were called upon to take personal responsibility as the training moved from childhood into the adult realms of life: money and relationships (Chapter Seven). The relationships weekend culminated in a warm water rebirth which, whilst reproducing the environment of the birth experience, required a high degree of trust, acceptance, love and support amongst the participants. Chapter Eight brought the participants into the spiritual realm, challenging notions of God and spirituality. The final process, the cold water rebirth where cold equates to death, provided the opportunity for the participants to embody personal responsibility as they practiced body mastery using the conscious connected breathing. The unconditional love generated during the final Completion weekend facilitated the completion of the training and the return of the participants to their private lives. Within rebirthing discourse, this unconditional love and acceptance of the self motivates and supports the person to continue the transformation process, not only for themselves, but also for their intimates, community and the wider environment.

Rebirthing posited physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual 'well-ness' as located within the individual's personal and social history and it was through the highly individualised personal journeys of these men and women over a nine-month period that the primary tenets of rebirthing were manifest and explicit: thought is creative, the self as a spiritual being, and holistic health. The energy body schema supported the notion of 'bodies as social agents' (Lyon & Barbalet 1994:49) where the body was understood as the primary source of self-knowledge through emotion and somatic experience. Throughout the

training and the rebirthing sessions, the participants were encouraged to fully embody their experiences both somatically and emotionally—embodiment ultimately viewed as a source of information and resolution of disharmony.

Through the rebirthing process, the deep and full exploration of their embodied selves, leading to emotional and somatic awarenesses, provided information from the past that enabled each individual to rewrite their narratives, recreate their history, reassess and reframe their beliefs and values in order to develop a greater degree of personal responsibility for their future. 'For things to change, first I must change' summarised the broad intention for rebirthing and the participants embodied the love, acceptance and agency required for ongoing transformation.

The transformation the participants personally wrought over the nine months provided evidence of a successful training. From a rebirthing perspective, learning to love and accept themselves preceded loving and accepting others, and having the courage and commitment to the rebirthing training to change what was 'not working' in their lives. As Margaret proposed, 'when the students have changed what is not working, and learning new strategies that are not taught anywhere else and putting them into practice, gives them an opportunity to create difference in their lives'. Through the training, self-perceptions of personhood were challenged; the impact of their history, family, wider milieu were interrogated, and they were provided with opportunities to question their beliefs and values in relation to their lives and dreams and desires. Understanding themselves to be spiritual beings with multiple lifetimes within the rebirthing framework, bestowed on them full responsibility for achieving the desired transformation in their lives. Rebirthing and this training provided an opportunity to exercise agency to facilitate change in their lives. The evaluation forms filled out by the participants for Margaret also tendered evidence of changing lives during the nine months of training. Margaret reported to me, 'It takes two years for this rebirthing training to fully integrate into their lives. Students from previous trainings often come back to me after two years and say, 'look at me, it works',—evidence of the sense of personal empowerment and agency they have practiced within their lives, with positive results.

The excitement of the participants at the end of the training was palpable through the accounts of their own personal transformations and their excitement for the future despite not clearly knowing what that future would be. The final day of the training—a day of honouring their process and learning, acknowledging their acceptance and willingness to change—was a day of ‘unconditional love’, fully embodied and experienced as emotion. Although ‘sadness’ of the program finishing was expressed, the participants’ most potent sentiments were of ‘joy’, ‘closeness’, ‘bonding’, feeling ‘loved and cherished’, ‘amazing’, ‘excitement’, and ‘bliss’. Margaret’s parting words to them were,

*I want you to acknowledge yourself, for the courage it took to be here, the courage it took to persist with your journey, the courage to have to face all these topics, and parts of your lives, and tell yourself the truth. And now look at you, giving yourselves such amazing opportunities to go out and be different, live differently, and live with all these new attributes that you have as a result of being here.*

NOTE:

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## Appendix 1

### Class Agreements for the Duration of the Rebirther Training

- I agree to give the speaker at the time my full attention, and to speak only when it is appropriate to do so.
- I agree to be clear and precise with my communication and to speak so that all can hear me.
- I agree to tell the truth, as it is for me, and with compassion for others.
- I agree to share any upset that I may experience in the room to enable it to be cleared as soon as possible. Sharing allows the energy in the group to move on. Withholding brings the energy and the group to a stop.
- I agree to keep all time agreements.
- I will ask for what I want.
- I agree to take 100% responsibility for my feelings, actions and results in this training.
- I agree to refrain from drinking alcohol or taking drugs of any kind during workshop hours. **This includes cigarettes and analgesics.** Prescription medicines are permitted and should be made known to the trainer.
- I agree to attend the training no matter what, despite sickness, drama, fear, self-sabotage etc. This includes family distractions.
- I agree to refrain from eating sweets, gum, or drinks in the room unless otherwise indicated.
- ALL INFORMATION shared in the training is STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL and I agree not to repeat any personal information or comment made by another participant (or assistant) outside the training.
- I AGREE TO KEEP ALL THE ABOVE AGREEMENTS

## Appendix 2

### Common Codependent Characteristics

External referencing - People pleasing and image control

Needing to be liked and/or approved of

Dependency attachments to other people

Needing to be needed or indispensable - Boundary issues.

Feeling responsible for other people  
(Other people's feelings, behaviour, success failure, happiness, etc.)

Fear of telling the truth

Fear of being wrong. Needing to be right. (Distrust of own opinions, beliefs, perceptions and feelings)

Disabled will. (Suppressed emotions, out of touch with own intuition, wants and desires, gullible or cynical)

Lack of spontaneity

Lack of trust

Playing the martyr and suffering gallantly

Rescuing and care taking

Rigidity. (dichotomised thinking, black/white, right/wrong, either/or)

Ineffective or indirect communication.

Trying to control others.

Perfectionism

Addiction to struggling/trying/controlling/overriding their own wills and bodies.

Self-rejection, self-pity, and self-importance.

Shame and blame

Denial

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