

BUILDING BONDS WITH BEBA:

ONE FAMILY'S HEALING JOURNEY

BY CHERI RAE

Sixteen-month-old Daniel is not playing a game. Grunting and sweaty with exertion, he is working hard. He places his feet against my chest, braces himself, and pushes headfirst down my extended legs. Once he reaches my feet, he anxiously, blindly, crawls back up my body and repeats the process again and again. His movements are purposeful, inner-driven, intense.

My toddler is re-enacting his birth.

He seems to know exactly what to do, how to move and why to do it, but I am bewildered. My heart is racing, and I am frightened, uncomfortable with the primal forces manifested in this small child.

Daniel's therapists, Raymond Castellino and Debby Takikawa nod reassuringly in my direction. They gently support Daniel, speaking respectfully to

him in low tones, encouraging him to tell his story in the only way he knows how.

We are in the midst of another powerful session at BEBA (Birthing Evolution, Birthing Awareness), a Santa Barbara-based nonprofit organization that promotes bonding and attachment between parents and children. The highly specialized, infant-centered family therapy practiced here helps heal the earliest traumas—at conception, during pregnancy, at birth and during infancy. The therapists draw on a combination of principles from pre- and peri-natal psychology, midwifery, obstetrics, crainiosacral therapy, and a dozen additional influences.

BEBA is the brainchild of Drs Castellino and McCarty. Raymond Castellino, D.C. is a retired chiropractor who has practiced a holistic, mind-body approach to health for some 30 years. He co-founded BEBA with Wendy McCarty, Ph.D., M.F.T., R.N., in 1993 as a research institute and internship program. Facilitators at BEBA are professionals trained in the Castellino Prenatal and Birth Therapy Training Program, a separate program for teaching this approach to resolving early trauma in order to improve present-day functioning. Students from across the nation, and as far away as Europe, Australia and even Africa have trekked to Santa Barbara to study with Castellino, who also journeys abroad to teach.

BEBA provides therapeutic services for families who gravitate toward it. To date, BEBA has worked with some 40 local families, usually in weekly, hour-long sessions over a six- to eight-month period. All sessions are videotaped for research and training purposes, and families agree to participate in follow-up for 20 years. The small, volunteer staff typically works with eight to ten families at any given time.

BEBA works with families even before their babies are born, and usually begins sessions with infants before they are three months old. Skeptics may scoff at the idea of therapeutic work with such new arrivals, but Castellino is nonplused. "I have a deep religious conviction that all life is sacred, and that belief is supported by conception and birth dynamics and how profoundly they influence our lives. But I'm not interested in trying to convince people or trying to change their minds. What I am willing to do is to sit with them and discover their own history; it's only a matter of time before they make connections themselves, if they're willing."

He explains, "What we're doing here is acknowledging the inherent wisdom in each child, and exploring what we can know about the perspective of the infant or the prenaté," explains Castellino. "We're finding the movement patterns and rhythms of the infant, mirroring and reflecting them back. As we do this, the work inspires the basic nature of the child."

We are here because Daniel's entire life has been turbulent. Conceived in an abusive relationship, he was carried and birthed by a young, unmarried woman who castigated herself for her situation, and felt shameful and distraught throughout her pregnancy. Adoption was always her intention, but Daniel's first placement fell through after the couple who took him home from the hospital unexpectedly returned him to her a few

days later. She then cared for Daniel for a few weeks, and eventually made contact with my husband and me to become the parents of her child.

What was a joyful surprise adoption to us—and a relief to her—was a shock to Daniel's entire system. By the time Daniel came into our home, he was a month old; he had already slept in too many cribs and had been held—and abandoned—by too many people, too many times. For all he knew, bonds were meant to be broken.

I was the third woman in his life to call myself his mother, but initially, I was just another in a series of strangers to him. Despite my best efforts to comfort and reassure him he was finally safe, he was on guard. Desperate to find a familiar place, a scent he recognized, a touch that felt reassuring, he unhappily searched my face, burrowed into my shoulder and struggled in my arms. He cried a lot. So did I.

Daniel literally preferred to sleep alone in his crib than to be gently held, rocked or walked. He slept so lightly that the closing of a door, a rustling of newspapers, a gust of wind would awaken him, startled and screaming out of his feathery sleep. The sound of a siren could set him off for a half-hour's sob; when the stroller bumped over an uneven sidewalk he was inconsolable.

About the time Daniel first learned to smile, his safety was once again threatened when his birthfather, who had previously agreed with placement, changed his mind and contested the adoption. With a legal case based on fabricated evidence and a series of outright lies, he nevertheless was able to force an unexpected custody battle in the courts.

Our commitment to Daniel meant that we would protect him no matter what it took, but the emotional, psychological and financial costs of the

legal struggle took a terrible toll on our family's sense of security. Day after day, as we juggled family life and legal concerns, we agonized over Daniel's future. We hoped for judicial wisdom, we prayed for grace.

After more than one interminable year of litigation, the birthfather's case finally fell apart, his parental rights were terminated and Daniel's adoption was finalized.

The judge declared us Daniel's parents, declared Daniel our son, but we needed more than a legal decision to become a family. Wounded by our battle to keep Daniel safe, we were individuals bonded by words, deeds and good intentions. But we were in great need of healing to strengthen those bonds into family ties. When we serendipitously discovered BEBA—and they had a therapy time and space available for us—we decided it was no accident, and figured it could only help.

WE ARE IN THE BEBA TREATMENT ROOM, in a small space on Carrillo Street. It is arranged cozily, with a dhurrie on the floor, a comfy couch and futon, and several soft pillows. A variety of toys—from stuffed animals to bizarre plastic monsters—are assembled on shelves. Several oversized exercise balls are scattered throughout the room, and a large shipping cylinder, carpeted in the inside, lies in one corner.

Ray and I are quietly discussing Daniel's birthfather when we hear a loud thwack. Across the room, Daniel is banging his forehead against the sliding glass door. A chill runs down my spine: he can't hear our words, much less understand them, yet he clearly perceives what we are saying. And he is showing us how upset he is by it. When we stop talking, the head-banging immediately stops.

Ray addresses Daniel, "Your mom and I are talking about your birthfather

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and how scary he has been to you and to your family. And you're having strong feelings about that."

I am startled by the intensity of Daniel's reaction to our conversation, and amazed at how he is soothed by Ray's matter-of-fact observation and acknowledgment.

For the first time, I realize that Daniel has not been a passive bystander to the events of his life; rather he has absorbed and stored all the pain that has come his way. Today, finally, feeling safe in this supportive environment, he is able to express his feelings of fear and rage, sadness and loneliness.

Instantly, any lingering skepticism I once held about the value of this therapy has vanished. I am transformed from an interested observer to a committed participant. I have witnessed exactly what Ray has described, "We are not about reassurance; that's for adults. Children have the need for truth, to be supported in the present moment. This work is not about being happy or sad, it can carry any emotional tone, even terror and rage. We see it, hold it, then reflect it and bring it out. When we're doing something that's working, we want the family to get those skills as well."

Week after week, in the sessions that follow, I learn how to tune it to Daniel and to better understand his pain through his language of movement, sound and emotional expression. Our sessions begin to feel less like therapy and more like a meaningful dance of mirrored movement, repeated gestures, reflected sounds. Eventually, the edges between Daniel and I begin to blur. He is able to sit next to me instead of across the room; I am able to relax and play with him without looking first at the therapist for permission. We are beginning to behave like a mother and her child.

When Daniel purposefully selects toys from the bookshelf, they symbolically represent what he cannot explain: In his hands, killer whales and scary snakes become angry sperm; Koosh balls symbolize ovaries and eggs. When he yells into a long, flexible plastic tube, it's obvious he wants to be heard—and when we make the same sounds back at him, he is validated.

I don't completely understand exactly what we're doing here, but I believe in it with every fiber of my being. And I'm no longer frightened by Daniel's actions. I learn to scramble to keep up with him, to anticipate his moves, to keep him safe during his most ambitious endeavors. I've stopped questioning and analyzing these experiences that scramble my brain but satisfy my intuition.

When Daniel demands we hold him high, just inches from the ceiling while he performs a silent, twisting mid-air ballet, he looks for all the world like a fetus spinning in the womb. Strange as it may sound, it feels right.

When Daniel walks on tiptoe and repeatedly trips on every edge in the room, Debby observes that he is barely touching the earth, and showing us how has always lived on the edge.

When Daniel cries out in the middle of the night, we simply bring him into our bed and allow him to move, turning his body this way and that, moving down the length of the bed then back again. Whimpering, whining, he seems to be in a state of altered reality—neither asleep nor awake, he appears to be reenacting the mornings BEBA session. We cannot restrain him, nor can we comfort him. We let him do his work. Eventually, without waking up, he quiets and rests soundly once more. In the telling, our midnight activity may sound crazy, but in the dark and in the light of day, it feels right.

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In a session midway through our therapy, Daniel walks directly to the bookshelf, selects two figurines—a man and a woman. Calling them “Nonno” and “Nonna,” his names for his godparents, he hugs them, then demands a cup of water. First spilling the water all over himself, he then moves around the room, offering sips from the cup to everyone in the room. In a profoundly spiritual moment, this toddler performs a communion rite as sacred as in any church, and reenacts his own baptismal ceremony.

The significance of his movements is profoundly meaningful to me: with Daniel's future in legal limbo, we had hesitated to have him baptized. Finally, when he was nine months old, we took a leap of faith and invited friends and family to pray for Daniel's long-term health and safety as they witnessed the sacrament.

Daniel's retelling shows me that he must have felt the significance of his baptism; his christening was not something done to him but a sacrament in which he welcomed God's light and adopted a not only a new faith, but his new family as well.

It's not accident that the spiritual feeling of this work is continually apparent. Castellino states, “Professionally and personally, I have a reverence and a respect for life. It comes as a gift from God; it's grace, that's where it comes from. The coming and going of life is a sacred passage and it must be met with reverence. That reverence inspires the child to come forth with the truth of his or her own existence.”

While BEBA's work is focused primarily on “normal” children, not on those already identified as hurt, many of the families have encountered a difficult birth, an unexpected C-section, or neonatal distress. Adoptive families can benefit from the therapy because of the

early interruption in bonding. Castellino explains, "Every child who is separated from his or her biological mom has a wound of separation—that's a profound loss." In Daniel's case, he experienced that separation not once, but twice, and it took a lot of work to begin to heal the wound.

From his very first session with BEBA, Daniel would pick up the stuffed mama kangaroo, toss the baby from her pouch, leaving it to lie alone on the floor, and throw the mother down in a gesture that seems equally sad and angry. Week after week after week, he repeats these moves.

The casual observer might see a toddler playing with stuffed animals, nothing more.

After several months of therapy, though, Daniel picks up the mama kangaroo, carefully tucking the baby back into her pouch, then gently separating them—giving me the baby to hold. In turn, he cradles the mama, holding her in that sweet spot between his neck and shoulder as he tips his head, saying, "Mama." We spend a lovely moment, each of us carefully nuzzling, rocking and holding these fuzzy, soft creatures.

"You know," says Ray, "that kangaroo used to symbolize his birthmother; now it symbolizes you." "Yeah," I say, tears welling, throat tightening. Marveling at the profound amount of progress that simple observation reveals, I'm unable to say more, realizing that I am truly Daniel's mama now.

"Well, yeah," he laughs. We both do.

While tears and laughter mark the gentle side of BEBA work, throaty animal sounds, and powerful movements punctuate the more aggressive side.

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That side became more apparent to our family after Daniel's "mother issues" had been addressed and worked through, and our work seemed to plateau for a few sessions. Debby and Ray suggested my husband John enter the picture to introduce the "father issues." What happened was a couple of sessions during which Daniel retold his story to John in somewhat abbreviated fashion, and John learned to trust the BEBA process. Then all hell broke loose.

With John and Daniel on one side of the large shipping cylinder and Ray on the other, they begin what appears to be a fun game that soon turns very serious. Gentle, loving Ray suddenly transforms into a scary, aggressive force who stands his ground, intimidates, then finally gives way. All three of them roar, yell, face each other straight on and push with all their might.

In this carefully structured oppositional exercise, Ray leads John and Daniel straight into the lion's den. Father and son confront danger, look it straight in the eye, and together, defeat it.

It is all I can do to sit here and watch this go on and on. My own instincts are at war: I want to scoop Daniel up and take him to safety, yet I know that in order for him to be safe, he must face and defeat his demons. As in so many parenting situations, I know the best way to protect my son is to let him go.

When they finally finish all three are spent, exhausted yet exhilarated by the emotional release of this intense work. Like the proverbial Daniel, my toddler happily walks away from this ordeal, unscathed, untouched and stronger than ever.

"Love and compassion are important parts of the parenting equation, but parents need skills, too. But where have we been getting our skills? How many adults are in therapy because we grew

up in dysfunctional families? That's not to discredit our families, but how many of us want to do it differently? The scary thing is, when people want to do it differently, but find themselves doing the same behaviors their parents used with them. In making sure infants and babies are reflected accurately, we're working to support parents in skills different from our own upbringing."

Our previous parenting experience never prepared us for the challenges we faced in securing Daniel's safety-before and after his adoption. Participating in BEBA has helped us develop a set of parenting skills deeper and more perceptive than before. In doing so, we hope to continue to recognize and respect the deepest needs of our children.

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Our nine-month-long BEBA journey brought forth a new child. Today, Daniel is a hard-charging two-year-old who plants himself firmly in the center of the action, no longer on the edge. He is properly wary of strangers but not terrified by them; he no longer prefers to drink his milk alone on the couch, but climbs up into my lap to "cuddle with my Mommy." He smiles more, hugs more, laughs more. When he's angry, he expresses it, and lets it go.

People comment all the time how Daniel seems so different, so much more secure and confident, most of which I attribute to his courageous work in BEBA. Some are intrigued, some are skeptical about the work; others are outright insistent that those countless therapeutic sessions had no meaning whatsoever. What I know now that I didn't know before is to just let it be. I have been blessed to become the mother of a happy, safe and secure little boy who has become my son. That's all I ever wanted; it's all he ever needed. ♦