

Pedagogy of birth. Beyond corporeality:
generative paths of life and culture
Per una pedagogia della nascita.
Oltre la corporeità: percorsi generativi di vita e cultura

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ABSTRACT

Birth, generativity, parental care, educative care, parenthood, family, these are the keywords I have chosen to start from for my pedagogical reflection on a complex universe that has traditionally always been approached from a primarily medical, scientific and subsequently psychological, anthropological, sociological point of view, while pedagogical reflection has always tended to remain on the sidelines. On the basis of this reflection, there is a need to explore a new “hermeneutics of birth” insofar as the generative process cannot and must not be reduced to a purely reproductive function pertaining exclusively to the female sphere and considered only from a biological and medical point of view, but rather valued from a pedagogical point of view and from the point of view of human, social and cultural relations. This exploration will also be conducted by listening to the narratives of women and men who have been direct protagonists of this experience with the aim of highlighting the elements of pedagogical and political-cultural care that emerge from the being and acting of motherhood and fatherhood.

KEYWORDS

Parental care, motherhood, fatherhood, autobiographical method, birth.
Cura parentale, maternità, paternità, metodo autobiografico, nascita.

Nascita, generatività, cura parentale, cura educativa, genitorialità, famiglia, sono le parole chiave da cui ho scelto di partire per la mia riflessione in chiave pedagogica di un complesso universo che tradizionalmente è sempre stato affrontato dal punto di vista innanzitutto medico, scientifico e successivamente psicologico, antropologico, sociologico mentre la riflessione pedagogica è sempre rimasta tendenzialmente ai margini. Partendo da tale riflessione, si avverte la necessità di esplorare una nuova “ermeneutica della nascita” in quanto il processo generativo non può e non deve essere ridotto ad una pura funzione riproduttiva che attiene esclusivamente alla sfera femminile e considerato soltanto dal punto di vista biologico e della medicalizzazione, quanto piuttosto valorizzato dal punto di vista pedagogico e delle relazioni umane, sociali e culturali. Tale esplorazione sarà condotta anche prestando ascolto alle narrazioni di donne e di uomini che sono stati protagonisti diretti di tale esperienza con la finalità di mettere in luce gli elementi di cura pedagogica e politico-culturale che emergono dall’essere e dall’agire della maternità e della paternità.

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1. Towards a new hermeneutics of birth

The arrival of a child constitutes a fundamental event in the life of a couple, which transforms into a family, understood as a small community representing the foundational nucleus of society. It becomes important, therefore, to address the theme of birth in a broader context and to give significance to all parental figures, including the paternal one, because, as emphasized by Vanna Iori, the category of birth does not belong solely to women.

Birth cannot be seen solely as a physiological event, as it involves not only the physical changes but also the emotional experiences of the mother-child separation during childbirth, and the father's new perspective on the actual, 'flesh and blood' child. Gender differences play an important role because it is a shared yet different experience for fathers and mothers. If generativity is inherently dual, birth occurs from a woman's body, and thus, the modes and timing of motherhood and fatherhood are distinct (2007, p.12).

Generating new lives is not a function that concerns only women but rather a complex web of relationships, characterized by the acceptance and enhancement of differences, not only within the family nucleus but also within the broader community and political sphere. Assuming responsibility and co-responsibility in education, always keeping in mind that

gestation and the original care of offspring should be considered within a broader representation that includes the presence of the father and his awareness of his own physiology (which makes him crucial in conception but not directly involved in gestation), his emotional and symbolic function, and the fundamental and irreplaceable role he occupies alongside the mother and the child. The 'full' time of the future mother's presence within herself cannot correspond to the 'empty' time of the father; otherwise, the shared anticipation ends up reinforcing a distance and a different level of involvement in the preparation for birth (Musi, 2007, p.19).

The arrival of a child brings about a change that is destined to deeply impact the family's life cycle, as well as the identity construction of the parents, both as autonomous individuals as a couple, and as members of the broader social community. Not only do new identities take shape, but also new relational dynamics emerge both within and outside the family nucleus.

The foundation of the educational responsibilities that form within a family is linked to the intrinsic dynamics around which the family itself is constituted, and it is based on the shared educational commitment between both parents, which implies 'thinking together.' It is about 'caring together,' mutually sharing hopes, fears, and the typical expectations that come with educational concerns (Iori, 2005, p. 138).

For these reasons, it is essential to address this theme from the perspective of pedagogical reflection, paying attention to both the internal components of the family and the role it is called to play as the primary foundational unit of society, within a systemic-relational framework. The focus should be on supporting the family in its challenging task of consciously nurturing the growth of children, providing them with the necessary support to face the challenges of a complex society.

2. When does a family come into being?

The family is a living system, and its development occurs in stages within the dimension of time. The concept of development in family dynamics denotes a continuously changing reality over time, with roles that are constantly renewable. "The process of family development is, therefore, a progressive differentiation and structural transformation that must take place over the course of the family's history. This involves the active acceptance of new roles by individual members, as they abandon various positions they previously held" (Iori, 2006, p. 108).

Each event that occurs within the family system brings about significant changes, requiring a new family structure, that is, new ways of functioning and organizing. In this regard, Hill and Duvall (1948) speak of the family life cycle, asserting that each family member has their own developmental task, which is interpreted as a set of goals aimed at achieving their own identity and that of the family itself. According to Duvall (1957), the family life cycle is characterized by multiple stages associated with specific significant events, the foremost being the formation of the couple. The couple is an open system that doesn't emerge from a simple union of two individuals but rather from the meeting of two life stories geared towards change. The key moments in forming a couple are represented by the choice of a partner, which is the outcome of the quest for romantic love. This choice is the result of the interaction of various biological and psychological variables, which play a decisive role in guiding us toward one person rather than another.

Biological variables are part of mechanisms aimed at species preservation and creating conditions that ensure

the safety of its members during development. From a psychological perspective, the quality of the bond with the original attachment figure is crucial. According to Bowlby's attachment theory (1982), we learn that the more satisfying the original relationship was, the more likely it is to develop a sense of trust in new relationships. Conversely, the more ambivalent, ambiguous, and unsatisfactory the attachment relationship was, the more likely it is to observe ambiguous or avoidant behaviors in those who had this type of experience.

Therefore, the choice of a partner is never a random phenomenon, as the experiences each person accumulates throughout their life, especially during childhood, shape 'unconscious models' in the mind, predisposing certain behaviors in romantic relationships. This is followed by the defined period of falling in love, characterized by reciprocity, correspondence, and conformity to shared expectations. For a couple's relationship to evolve and endure over time, it is necessary to accept the other with their tangible characteristics and limitations, allowing trust and support to prevail in the relationship. This marks the transition from the infatuation phase to the decision to create a life together through marriage or cohabitation. Marriage represents the official act that makes the couple visible and socially effective, safeguarding their rights and responsibilities.

When does a family actually 'come to life'? A couple transforms into a family with the arrival of a child, representing the realization of both personal and couple aspirations. The birth of a child is a significant and transformative moment within the family because it changes the marital couple into a parental couple with different plans and responsibilities. The entry of a new member implies a redefinition of roles and couple dynamics, reshaping the individual and social lives of the spouses according to the needs of the child.

Assuming the parental role involves taking care of the younger generation, providing affection and protection to allow the child to internalize trust, esteem, and warmth. It also means enabling the child to internalize a healthy model of emotional attachment and education and assisting them in navigating the social and extraneous aspects of life, especially school. The parenting phase typically occurs in the central stage of an adult's life.

As the child grows, they undergo various transformations - physical, cognitive, emotional, and relational - and become increasingly independent from their parents. Parents begin to recognize their child's abilities and competencies. This process is guided by the parents, expands, and is completed with the child's entry into the school environment and engagement with siblings and peers. In this stage, the family's primary task is to recognize the child as an increasingly autonomous individual. Through school activities and extracurricular pursuits, the child learns new ways of relating and establishes meaningful relationships outside of the family of origin.

Within the family, the first and most significant stage of socialization and enculturation processes is realized, through which the assimilation of social values and lifestyles specific to a particular social system occurs. In other words, the ability to adapt to the social system generally depends on one's family of origin. A family rooted in values, capable of fostering both internal and external relationships, has the capacity to create meaning, facilitating in young individuals creativity, acceptance of diversity, and a deep understanding of identity. For this reason, the family is the primary agency of socialization, not only because it forms the basis for subsequent socializations but also due to its centrality in the process of achieving expressive, functional, and social identity.

Family relationships possess unique characteristics that cannot be found in other types of relationships. The family operates primarily through adult exemplarity, which entails clear educational responsibilities such as the selection of reference values to guide one's actions and to which children should be oriented. There is also an educational planning aspect where parents are called upon to define the goals, content, and methods of educational work. In particular, "the couple, not being the mathematical sum of two individualities, has the possibility of expanding the realms of feeling, broadening the horizons of thought and action, and creating a fabric around a corner of the world characterized by those small gestures that give it depth and make it uniquely protective, recognizable, and familiar" (Musi, 2007, p. 149).

Regardless of whether these relationships are positive or complex in nature, they deeply shape the developmental journey of the individual, serving as a foundation for the subsequent refinement of their growth path. Thus, among its functions, the family outlines the basic personality of the individual, the anthropological structure of the person, well-defined along the axis of time and in the relationships within the social and natural environment. All family members share responsibility in strengthening family relationships, with parents taking the lead and gradually involving their children in enriching and fully developing the domestic system.

Education is a complex process that primarily involves the emotional and affective dimensions. It is an encounter and exchange between personalities and relationships that the child experiences with their parents. Education is not limited to the transmission of correct information and cultural norms; it is also based on the deep affections that are transmitted, especially in the child's early years. These affections represent the safe space within which healthy relationships are structured. Therefore, the family is both seen as a source of emotional support and a hub of emotional exchange, as it is the environment in which the individual grows and adapts to life in the social system.

In an era of significant transformations, increasing fragmentation, and social complexity, the family remains a fundamental reference point characterized by profound existential and emotional significance.

The complexity of the parental role today is closely linked to the evolution of society, which demands a constant

redefinition and renegotiation of the parental role to adapt to changing values and the advancement of new pedagogical concepts. “Pedagogy must protect and respect parental educational functions, not only to promote the growth of offspring as human beings but also to guide them towards correct socialization dynamics. Interchangeable roles supported by stable educational functions form the specific proposal of family pedagogy in relation to the sociology of the family or family education” (Corsi, Stramaglia, 2009, p. 37).

3. The generativity of words between body and memory

Within the context of contemporary pedagogical debates, it becomes apparent that there is a close relationship between the body and identity, between biological identity and personal identity. Above all, it is highlighted how one of the most fundamental forms of self-awareness is connected to corporeality, which necessarily also passes through autobiographical and narrative memory.

The body, as emphasized by Merleau-Ponty, is the primary source from which all reflection originates. It is the element that allows the subject to always be in relation to the world, so that “every aspect of our relational openness to the world, to others, every way in which we relate to others, including dialogue and conversation, all passes through the flesh. There is nothing that can be said, thought, or expressed that can establish a relationship apart from the flesh that we are” (Marassi, 2015).

The hermeneutic-phenomenological approach situates the original dimension of human beings within the realms of corporeality, orality, and dialogue, distancing itself from the dogmatic view inherent in metaphysics, which tends to absolutize specific perspectives in order to trace meaning within the horizon of continuous, open, and pluralistic construction, interpretation, and reinterpretation.

In this perspective, the two spheres of thought, one linked to rationality and the other to emotions, must necessarily be considered in a dynamic interplay, as otherwise, there is a risk of falling into a one-sided view. Instead, what we want to emphasize here is the importance of aiming for a comprehensive, integral, and complex formation of the human subject-person who lives, acts, learns, and transforms themselves consciously and responsibly through the development of ‘rational affectivity’.

As clarified by Gargani, autobiographical narration is not simply the description of events and experiences we have lived through, but it always involves reasoning about them. This is what makes it both a pedagogical practice and a practice of care. He highlights that:

We have a birth that is determined by the act of procreation by our parents... But then there is another birth that is not the one perceived from the outside, and it is precisely the birth we give ourselves by narrating our story, redefining it through writing that establishes our style by which we demand to be understood by others (1992, p. 5).

Pregnancy is a unique and intimate moment in a woman’s life, bringing about many changes in the couple’s routines. The first significant change that a woman faces is undoubtedly the physical one. She may feel different and fear not being able to return to her previous physical shape. All of this is heightened by the whirlwind of hormones and the challenge of adapting to new rhythms. More often than we might think, in the early days of a baby’s life, a new mother experiences a deep emotional state of sadness and fatigue, known as ‘maternity blues’ or ‘third-day syndrome’. In these cases, the role of the partner and all those close to the woman is crucial because sometimes the new mother simply needs someone by her side who can acknowledge her reactions without causing alarm or minimizing them, helping her find and accept new balances.

In this regard, the narratives of mothers and fathers collected by the author within the framework of a parenting education and support program are illuminating. Below are some of the most significant experiences, through which we can understand how the birth of a child can be considered a profoundly generative experience that does not originate at the moment of childbirth. Instead, it is a generativity that begins from the moment one discovers that a new life is preparing to enter the world and is constantly renewed every day, nourished by a system of mutual and circular relationships in which each person is influenced by the other.

Mother and child engage with each other based on their own characteristics, their ways of communicating, experiencing emotions, and building relationships. “And it is in these early relationships that the foundations of a relational style are laid, even starting from instinctual biological components and temperamental traits that are ‘given’, but are continuously reworked in an interactive context from which they receive meaning and significance” (Formenti, Gamelli, 1988, p. 12).

Later on, the ‘dyadic’ relationship becomes a true ‘community’ dialogue, in which the paternal figure takes on great relevance, followed by the entire family and social network.

3.1 'Giving birth'

I have given birth to two children: I have always loved this expression, 'giving birth,' because, in my opinion, its evocative power perfectly encapsulates the entire journey of gestation. In fact, I felt 'powerful' like never before and after, during my two pregnancies, in a growing state of grace from the announcement of their arrival until the terrible and cathartic moment of childbirth.

In my first pregnancy, in particular, the wonder of what was happening to me gave me the ability to tolerate discomforts and inconveniences that accompanied me throughout all nine months: small things, but they immediately gave me a sense of how motherhood would affect my body, first and foremost, but also my daily life. It was still a dream, an imagined reality, but in truth, in my mind, I felt like a mother right from the start. I still vividly remember the tension of the birthing moment, the tearing through which the newborn forcefully made its way. Yet, if I close my eyes, the only sensation my body remembers is that I 'gave birth'; I unmistakably felt this creature bloom out of me, and once again, I felt powerful. The dreamed-of mother I was became real. I am new, there is a 'before' and 'after' in me, as in the history of humanity. It's me, and I'm a mother; a mother, like billions of others, but like them, unique and unrepeatable, because the spark, the genetic combination that gave life to two unique and unrepeatable human beings, was unique and unrepeatable... like billions of others who, one day, thanks to my daily educational efforts, will also contribute to the growth of society.

3.2 Harmonies and disharmonies of birth

It is not particularly easy to retrace an experience as intense and powerful as pregnancy and childbirth, especially if, like me, you fall into the category of 'mature first-time mothers.' To begin with, as often happens, my pregnancy manifested itself shortly after the loss of my father, almost as if to directly testify to the post-grief generative impulse. Perhaps my mature age and the unplanned nature of the event helped me to live with relative serenity and acceptance the multiple changes (not always positive) that my body went through, along with the sensations and emotions that accompanied them.

My mother and my brother participated with great empathy and affection in the evolution of the pregnancy, supporting me during the inevitable moments of anxiety, fear, and melancholy. Probably, at that moment, the potential for a new life was also useful for them to exorcise the pain of losing a loved one. As for my husband, what I remember most vividly is a state of disorientation, apprehension, and fear of future responsibilities, along with a good dose of patience and tolerance for my emotional ups and downs. The most vivid and intense memories inevitably go to the moment of my son's birth, perhaps because it was characterized by 'unusual' events, unforeseen and unpredictable, with strong emotional involvement.

Like in a film sequence, I scrolled through the images of the faces of the many mothers (exclusively mothers) of children with disabilities whom I have encountered and gotten to know in my role as a special education teacher. For a few minutes, or perhaps just moments, their thousand fears, vulnerabilities, and a hidden sense of guilt for not having been 'good enough' to give birth to a 'normal' child became mine. Fortunately, the constant emotional support from my family helped to erase the sense of panic and helplessness that characterized part of this experience. I remember clearly feeling a reassuring 'protective barrier' around me.

3.3 The fullness of pregnancy

The story of my motherhood is not easy, but perhaps for that reason, even more intense and emotional. I became pregnant with my son Carlo, on the threshold of turning 40, after three years of trying, hormonal stimulations, and ovulation monitoring that had only yielded painful results: a miscarriage and an ectopic pregnancy that, fortunately, I discovered and resolved before it manifested its more problematic outcomes, precisely because the previous short pregnancy had taught me to recognize its symptoms... I still remember the songs I sang to him to lull his silent sleep before he announced himself with the first kicks. Among all, I preferred Ron's song: 'Non abbiám bisogno di parole', especially in the chorus when he said... 'I'll lift you up every time you fall, and I'll pick up the flowers you lose along the way, because all I want is to be with you, without chains, to be with you!'

It's just a song, but it quickly became the source of inspiration for my parenting vision: to be there with unconditional love, to guide, encourage, and soothe, but with respect and recognition of a person I wanted to be independent and free. Who knows how well I've been able to keep this commitment in these almost 15 years of motherhood...

3.4 From dream to reality

It's not easy to recount my first and only experience of pregnancy because the emotions, still as vivid as when I lived through them, lack words to be expressed. The desire for a child found its place when I, too, felt desired, and then it took shape inside me. I couldn't say what it meant to me, perhaps a form of healing or taking care of someone who had yet to grow, or the fantasy that something of me would continue to exist and live even after my death. I don't know. Gradually, it became a desire to be shared and realized as a couple. I never thought of my daughter as solely mine, but I built an intimate space within me, ours, mine, and hers, from the moment I discovered I was pregnant. As soon as she entered the world, that initial intimate space began to expand day by day, where with tenderness and firmness, my partner and I contributed to guiding our daughter to move and gradually claim spaces that were her own, where she could move autonomously while always recognizing the importance of others.

In all these stories, we can discern the idea that childbirth represents a "double birth". It's not just the arrival of a new individual but also the birth of a mother and a father, leading to the transformation of a couple into parents within a relationship that continuously nourishes itself and evolves. Caring for children is a valuable skill that is not gender-dependent and should be equally shared by both parents. It's also noteworthy that this isn't solely a family matter but has a substantial impact on society at large, shaping the language and culture of future generations. These narratives highlight the importance of recognizing and valuing the dimension of educational care in a broader sense and promoting a vision of parenthood that goes beyond traditional gender roles. This can contribute to a more equitable and inclusive society where the responsibilities of parenthood are shared impartially among all family members.

Furthermore, it is evident that motherhood is not an event that exclusively concerns mothers but also fathers, the family network, as well as healthcare professionals. Becoming a mother is not just to fulfill a personal need but also to contribute to a larger societal project, as emphasized by Luigina Mortari.

The theoretical operation that assigns a significant role to the maternal relationship in the search for the essence of care does not intend to authorize the imagination that exclusively sees women as having a vocation for caregiving. Instead, it aims to emancipate care from any univocal connection with the feminine and to analyze it in all its complexity and contradictions. It underscores the value of care as a generative matrix of civilization. The care that a mother is capable of providing not only ensures the continuation of a community's life but also shapes the language and culture of the newcomers. Mothers and those who care for children, nurturing and cultivating them while ensuring they acquire full autonomy and become capable of self-care and contributing to caregiving practices, actually lay the foundations of social reality. The maternal function is not merely reproductive, as it is often defined, but rather a generator of culture (2006, p. 60).

The role of the father has become equally fundamental, and the image of the father has undergone significant changes in recent decades. We have moved from a distant and less involved figure in childcare to one that has acquired a very active role in the upbringing of children, being present in actions and behaviors that are affectionate, patient, and participatory. As mentioned earlier, we are no longer facing a strong differentiation of roles between mother and father but rather a complementarity and complicity in the growth of children, from which they will benefit in terms of identity and the development of personal and social skills.

The reflections of fathers, as mentioned below, raise interesting aspects regarding parenthood and the couple's relationship. While every situation is unique, and there is no universal formula for parenthood, there are many variables to consider, including the needs of parents, children, and the social and cultural context in which they live. The important thing is for parents to work together to create a healthy and balanced environment for their children, regardless of the form their partnership takes. Open communication and mutual respect are crucial in any type of parenting or couple relationship. The desire to become parents can bring a mix of complex emotions, but ultimately, it is an act of love, dedication, and personal and societal growth.

3.5 Being a father

Entering your children's lives on tiptoe, with delicacy, with respect, without violating it, paying attention to the precarious balances, the insecurities. Helping them build themselves, interpreting their character, their desires, helping them discover and better understand their personality. Assisting them in becoming «women» and «men,» capable of playing their part in the world. Immersing yourself in the swamps of their sadness and handing them the keys to save themselves with their own strength. Not imposing, but empathizing, guiding, advising, illuminating their path without imposing customary routes. Knowing they will make mistakes, and when they do, you must tell them that they can confide in you for everything because you will help them get out of trouble without con-

demning them, as you and their mother remain the only shoulders they can truly cry on. Knowing they will leave you one day, and there's nothing you can do about it, but wherever they go in the world, they will carry the love, teachings, and memories you tried to build so that they could cherish them, and along with the memories... keep a part of you.

3.6 A daunting challenge...

Parenthood has altered my perspective on the world. Some things that once seemed so important have lost their value, while others have gained. It's the sense of responsibility towards my child: their needs, future aspirations, fears, problems, joys, and pains, their education in a world that is undergoing radical changes. It's a challenge that can be dizzying and, at the same time, wakes me up every morning with the greatest joy in my heart.

The responsibility of guiding them with the awareness that they will ultimately choose their own path in life: this is the most beautiful burden every parent should carry.

3.7 From 'me' to 'us'

Being a father has changed my relationship with the world. From the moment my first daughter was born, and then gradually with all the others, my priorities shifted substantially from 'I' to 'we' and 'them.' The joys, pains, and worries about my own things were joined, almost exponentially, by the joys, pains, and worries about the things in life that concern them. This remains true even now that they are grown and almost entirely self-sufficient. I have never thought of my children as exclusively mine but as belonging to the entire society. If I were to summarize it in a single phrase, I would say that being a father, for me, has meant living an 'augmented' life. The exact reason is not entirely clear to me, but perhaps it relates to an instinctive search for a kind of 'herd immortality'.

3.8 Balancing joy and responsibility

Being a father is an experience that always moves in the delicate balance between joy and responsibility. It's an experience that changes, makes you more responsible, matures you, and makes you better. In my experience, one consideration stands out. The need to reconsider the idea that parenthood is tied to a romantic relationship and to consider the idea that one of the most effective 'parenting partnerships' could be formed by two single individuals who come together solely in a parenting alliance. In this way, the psychological and physical well-being of the children would not be subject to the continuous fluctuations of the often precarious romantic union of the parents but would have a guarantee of lasting stability, perhaps even 'regulated' in advance from the moment of choosing the union for procreation.

In light of what has been said, the family remains the primary place where the meaning of existence is learned, constituting one of the foundational pillars of human society. Its primary function is not only to satisfy some basic needs of its members but also to serve as the primary network in which children form bonds, experience their first relational dynamics, solidify their own identity, grow in competence, develop skills, and project themselves towards exploring different worlds and new relationships. Within the family, they find the resources to pursue independence. Ultimately, the family is not just the site of biological birth but, more importantly, the site of social birth—a process through which every human being incorporates values and knowledge from their group and then from the society in which they live.

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