



Reckoning With Birth

What would happen if we took our natality as seriously as our mortality?

Jennifer Banks

MAY 2023

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Banks writes that “death has been humanity’s central defining experience, its deepest existential theme, more authoritative somehow than birth, and certainly more final.” Why do we pay so much more attention to death than to birth? What if we understood ourselves as “natal creatures”? How could this framing change the way we see ourselves and others?

2. According to Banks, “Each new thing we add to the world is another birth; our having been born is what guarantees us the ability to act, to work as agents in our societies.” How is natality an act of human creativity? In what ways is birth a subversive act against totalitarian powers, as Banks and Hannah Arendt suggest?

3. Looking at many pro-natal groups, Banks expresses concern that their political priorities have often valued a fetus’s life more highly than that of the struggling mother or the hungry child: “Motherhood is venerated in places like the United States except when it comes time to pay the bill from the maternity ward, offer maternity leave, feed a mother’s children, or come up with solutions to the child-care conundrum.” Have you noticed these dynamics in your own circles? How can our political priorities better support mothers?

4. Banks acknowledges that “today, celebrating birth can seem like an oblivious denial of just how dire our political, social, and ecological reality is.” Do you agree? Do you believe choosing birth in the midst of ecological disaster is selfish or willfully blind? How does this argument relate to older historical panics about, for example, overpopulation?

5. How does birth break down “the dualisms humans use to structure reality: man/woman, mind/body, thought/experience, destruction/creation, self/other, creator/created, birth/death”? Do you agree with Banks that birth challenging those binaries actually makes it “an act of resistance” or makes motherhood “an expression of alterity”? Or do you think that the cultural norms surrounding them prevent birth and motherhood from genuinely challenging any of our assumptions about society?

6. What powerful forces are working to restrict birth among “the poor, disabled, religious or racial minorities, women on welfare, the gender-nonconforming, the sick”? How can we create an inclusive birth ethic that protects all women?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING:

Viva Hammer, “Failure to Thrive,” November 2022: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/failure-thrive>

Annie Selak, “What the Church Owes Families,” October 2020: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/what-church-owes-families>

Eve Tushnet, “Why They Call Us,” September 2022: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/why-they-call-us>

John Gehring, “Widening the ‘Pro-Life’ Frame,” July 2018: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/widening-pro-life-frame>

“Writing Climate Change: An interview with Dorothy Fortenberry,” April 2023: <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/podcast/writing-climate-change>