



## Reflections on Writing

### *Becoming Us*

By Elly Taylor, AARC

In my teens, Mills and Boon novels were regularly “borrowed” from older sisters, passed furtively between friends, and secreted in school bags. Romances sustained me during bleak times in my teenage years after my parents divorced. I was still immersed in romance novels when I met my husband; I was 17.

I was well prepared for parenthood, or so I thought. I read everything I could get my hands on, did prenatal yoga, and searched out private antenatal classes, and it all paid off: the birth was wondrous. Our midwife showed my husband how to stand with his hands on my hips and do “birth circles” in early labor; it felt like we were dancing. She demonstrated acupressure for him, and when the pains became intense I felt grateful for his touch and comfort. She suggested to him that he stand behind me so I could lean into his arms, and I gave birth, literally and figuratively, supported by him; he had my back.

We had our first argument as new parents in the hospital parking lot and our second driving home. We didn’t normally argue, so I was shocked. Over the next few weeks and months, the conflict increased. I sought solace in my budding relationship with my son, and my husband worked harder in his two jobs. A new sense of “us” was emerging.

At the same time I studied psychology and then, pregnant with our second child, trained and began my employment as a relationship counsellor, working with couples, who like us, were on the front lines in the trenches of early parenthood. Over the years, I took history after history of their relationship journey -

hundreds of them - finding that we all had the same twists and turns: things change, in life and in love, after two become three, and that these changes inevitably have effects on a couple’s relationship. What I was also learning, both personally and professionally, was that how a couple manages the changes determines the future of their relationship. I remember thinking someone should write a book about all this stuff. I didn’t think it would be me.

Walking one day with my son in a pram, I spied a book in a bargain tray outside my local bookshop: *The Transition into Parenthood* by Jay Belsky and John Kelly (1995). A few years later, different baby, same pram, same shop, another one: *Naked Motherhood* by Wendy le Blanc (1999). Reading these two books raised my awareness and ire and fueled my passion to seek answers.

I was shocked to find decades of research dating back to the 1950’s that clearly showed a first child mixed things up. There were some major long-term studies done in the U.S: Cowan & Cowan discovered 92% of couples experienced increased disagreement and conflict in the first year after baby, Gottman & Gottman that 67% experienced a decline in relationship satisfaction in the first three. Le Blanc had also found 17% of Australians said having a baby together led to the end of their marriage. We now know that 7% of mothers and 10% of fathers suffer from a perinatal mood disorder and when they do, increase their risk for family breakdown. Basically: you fell in love, got married or moved in together, had a baby, and then you were stuffed.

I didn't want to know these things, and I certainly didn't want to be the one to bring them to the attention of others. But knowing them, I couldn't un-know. At the same time I was working through parenthood issues in my own marriage and also with my clients and experiencing that if you could work them through, the issues weren't actually a bad thing and didn't necessarily spell disaster for a couple's relationship. In fact, working through them was how you built foundations for a family.

In 2002, with our two children off to school, I was ready to go back to University, finish my degree and take on a heavier client load when life turned an unexpected corner. Our youngest was born ten months later and with her the resolve to finally get everything out of my head and on to paper.

Writing a book is arduous, but for me it was also the perfect foil for the tedious tasks of early parenthood. I wrote the first draft of *Becoming Us* between her sleeps, with parts of it scribbled on the back of receipts, chucked on the floor of the car as complete sentences popped into my head while ferrying the kids around, or on the shopping list on the fridge as concepts became concrete at the same time my hands were immersed in a soapy sink. My husband learned quickly not to throw *anything* out after I spent hours one dark night rummaging through the outside rubbish bin looking for my "special" scrappy pile of notes.

The road to publication was even more arduous. After a very promising start, when the original manuscript was accepted immediately by Jenny Darling, a prestigious Australian literary agent, it took three years and three different incarnations of the submission before a contract to write the book was finally offered by HarperCollins Australia. I have fond memories of the moment I found out.

I screamed so loud my kids (by then aged 7, 11, and 14) came rushing down the staircase, shocked to see their mother dancing like a banshee on hot coals and chanting, "oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh" into the phone.

One of the most challenging tasks in writing the book was ordering the hundreds of stories and years of research I had been collecting. I spent months and months on this decision and for a time it paralyzed me, threatening an ever-closer deadline for the book. I went back to my previous profession in recruitment for

I screamed so loud my kids came rushing down the staircase, shocked to see their mother dancing like a banshee on hot coals and chanting, "oh my gosh, oh my gosh, oh my gosh" into the phone.

inspiration, where I was responsible for assisting change management during the expansion of the company I worked for. I researched various change-management models and chose the ADKAR model from Prosci as being the most appropriate: ADKAR is an acronym for Awareness, Desire, Knowledge, Ability, and Reinforcement. This model provided an underpinning for the structure of each chapter of the book and some direction for its construction, but it didn't encompass the entirety of what I began to sense was emerging.

It was through collating boxes and boxes of paper and ordering and re-ordering the information and the chapters that it started to become clear: there were stages of

parenthood. Over a decade of research was finally finding form, and not just a book, but potentially a new way of conceptualizing parenthood was emerging on my study floor.

Shortly after the book was published in Australia in mid-2011, three back-to-back events occurred. My father was diagnosed with dementia, and my beloved Grandmother passed away not long afterwards. The not-for-profit organization I had worked for as a counsellor for the past fifteen years and who had promised to assist me with promoting the book underwent significant changes, which presented me with an ethical dilemma. Eventually I made the difficult decision to leave. These things combined took the wind right out of me; the book whispered its way into the world. It was not the roar I (or Harper Collins for that matter) had hoped for!

In 2013, my work fortuitously came to the attention of The Association for Prenatal and Perinatal Psychology and Health in the United States through social media, and I was absolutely delighted and excited that I was invited to present at the APPPAH 2013 conference in California. With that came the realization that my research into the transition into parenthood had international interest and the seed of an idea to independently publish an international version of *Becoming Us*. My trusty agent had her work cut out for her negotiating this with Harper Collins, but it freed me up in numerous ways, one of them was having the opportunity to add additional research into same-sex parent and adopting families.

All my plans for publication and presenting collapsed at the end of last year when instead of leaving for the U.S. I spent four days with my father

in his hospital room after he developed a serious infection that threatened to hasten his illness.

Finally, seven months later, in June of last year, I headed to North Carolina to present my work on parenthood stages at the Postpartum Support International conference. In September I travelled to the UK to present at Marce International in Wales, Parenting 2.0 in Dublin and Birthlight in Cambridge. There were numerous highlights but what stays with me are conversations I had after each and every presentation when someone had the courage to approach and, in hushed tones, share with me their personal story of distress due mainly, I believe, to lack of awareness of and adequate preparation for, the stages of parenthood.

My hope for *Becoming Us, 8 Stages to Grow a Family that Thrives* is not only to support parents but to use the book as a platform to educate professionals on the stages of parenthood and on the importance of preparing couples for, and supporting them through, each of them. When we can, we reduce both partner's risk for perinatal mood disorders and have the power to build healthy, stable, thriving families right from the very beginning.

**Elly Taylor, AARC**, is an emotionally focused couples therapist, perinatal relationship researcher, and international speaker. Her vision is to bring birth, health, and therapy professionals together to create a professional nest for the families in their community. She is currently developing a *Becoming Us* training program with this in mind. Elly lives in Sydney with her firefighter husband, their three children, and a bunch of pets. For free resources and to connect with Elly please visit [www.ellytaylor.com](http://www.ellytaylor.com).



#### References:

- Belsky, J. & Kelly, J. (1995). *The transition to parenthood: How a first child changes a marriage*. New York: Dell Publishing Group Inc.
- Cowan, C. P. & Cowan, P. A., (1999) *When partners become parents: The big life change for couples*. New York: Basic Books
- Gottman, J. M. & Gottman, J. S. (2007) *And baby makes three: The six-step plan for preserving marital intimacy and rekindling romance after baby arrives*. New York: Crown Publishers.
- Le Blanc, W. (1999) *Naked motherhood*. Sydney, Australia: Random House



# KINDRED

## Sharing the New Story of Childhood, Parenthood, and the Human Family

“Becoming Us is a Kindred Book of the Month for June 2014 because of its courageous contribution to ‘Sharing the New Story of Childhood, Parenthood and the Human Family.’”

You can watch (and hear) Elly Taylor share her story and inspiration for researching and writing *Becoming US* on Kindred's website:

<http://www.kindredcommunity.com/2014/05/becoming-us-8-steps-grow-family-thrives/>