

# EXPERIENCING ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

From Birth to Old Age



Isca Wittenberg

2<sup>ND</sup> EDITION



“As she approaches the age of 100, it is truly remarkable that Isca Wittenberg has been able to continue her research into life’s ‘endings and beginnings’ with the same enthusiasm, vigour and intellect she showed in former years.

She now brings her insight into extreme old age: the challenges and losses it presents and the accommodations which need to be arrived at. Far from being a depressing chapter on the frailties accompanying longevity, it gives a life-enhancing insight into how to be positive and still appreciate that which remains: nature, beauty, the joy of family.

She has lost none of her ability to arouse the readers’ emotional involvement in the case studies she describes. On the contrary, her comments are more perceptive than ever. Her particular gift is her ability to make her writing accessible to all: that is, to give complex psychoanalytical insights in language which the layman can also understand.”

**Lilian Levy, MBE**

Praise for the first edition:

“This is a wonderfully conceived book – on beginnings and endings – that in the author’s hands becomes a portal to review the connecting threads throughout our lives. All of us who worked with or knew Isca Wittenberg at the Tavistock were privileged to be in the presence of a very rare sensibility, characterized by a wise generosity of mind, the spirit of which is immanent throughout this deeply moving book. Now others will be in her company and shall enjoy the privilege of her companionship.”

**Christopher Bollas, author, *The Shadow of the Object, China on the Mind and The Freudian Moment***

“Isca Wittenberg has become very well known for her original approach to thinking about beginnings and endings in life and as they appear and challenge us in clinical and teaching contexts. This book is the fruit of her long engagement with this topic, and it is a most engaging overview of the major transitions in the human life cycle. It is written with freshness and simplicity and offers the reader an encounter with a writer who draws on her personal and professional experience with freedom and zest. A book about everyday life by a far-from-everyday person, which I think will stimulate and charm many, because it imparts wisdom so lightly.”

**Margaret Rustin, *Child and Adult Psychotherapist***

“Reading this book feels like being taken by the hand of a warm-hearted and experienced author going through your own life’s transitions: from life inside the mother to life outside, from separateness to finding new ways of connecting, from home and nursery to school and entering the world of work, from living alone to getting married, and from the experience of bereavement and retirement to the last step: growing old and facing death. The author convincingly includes psychoanalytic theory, vividly described clinical cases and reflections of her own life, while never excluding the spiritual dimension. In all these phases of life she keeps the infant aspects of the grown-ups alive. The book stimulates a deep emotional response on the reader. Isca Wittenberg writes with such liveliness that you think she is a young writer full of life and understanding.”

**Professor Gertraud Diem-Wille**, *training analyst for children, adolescents and adults of the Viennese Psychoanalytic Society and the International Psychoanalytical Association*

“A gem of a book. In her late eighties Isca Wittenberg writes as clearly as ever, distilling a lifetime’s experience into a work of genuine wisdom. This book displays a deep psychoanalytic understanding of the lifecourse married with a searching and compassionate mind, and has the added bonus of fascinating autobiographical fragments from one of the luminaries of child psychotherapy.”

**Graham Music**, *Consultant Child Psychotherapist, Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust*

## EXPERIENCING ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS

*Experiencing Endings and Beginnings* highlights the emotional turmoil which, to a greater or lesser extent, accompanies the changes we experience throughout life. It considers the nature of the anxieties aroused by a new situation, changes in our circumstances, beginnings and endings of relationships, gains and losses, and the ending of a previous state throughout the lifespan.

Endings and beginnings are shown to be closely related, for every new situation entered into, more often than not, involves having to let go of some of the advantages of the previous one as well as losing what is familiar and facing fear of the unknown. Isca Wittenberg shows how all these aspects of change evoke primitive anxieties, stemming from our earliest experiences of coming into this world. The book considers life changes including birth and weaning, going to nursery and school, beginning work, marriage, parenthood, and retirement, with reference to clinical examples. This revised edition includes a new chapter by the author examining advanced old age.

*Experiencing Endings and Beginnings* will be essential reading for psychoanalysts and psychotherapists in practice and in training. It will also be of great interest to other professionals and to readers interested in understanding change across the lifespan.

**Isca Wittenberg** is a consultant psychoanalytic psychotherapist for children and adults who worked at the Tavistock Clinic for twenty-five years and was vice-chairman of the Tavistock for ten years. She is a lifetime honorary member of the Tavistock Clinic, and her previous books include *Psycho-Analytic Insight and Relationships* and *The Emotional Experience of Teaching and Learning*, the latter with contributions from Gianna Williams and Elsie Osborne.



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*Isca Wittenberg*

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*For my children Raphael and Jonathan and grandchildren Gideon,  
Daniel, Amos, Libbi, and Kadya*



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I have for a long time had the wish to write about experiences of endings and beginnings and to extend the psychoanalytic understanding of human relationships to include the spiritual aspect of human beings, so closely linked to the belief that life is meaningful. Neville Symington's book "Emotion and Spirit" and our ongoing correspondence inspired me to think further about the need to bring together what he calls, "the

core values of the world's religions" and the psychoanalytic understanding of the mind.

The writing of this book began many years ago, was often interrupted for long periods, but received an impetus from a small group of colleagues who met to study ancient wisdoms such as the Kabbalah and to read the works of modern spiritual-religious writers. We looked at the actions of outstanding leaders, as well as those of ordinary people, who embody their love of mankind and view the resolution of conflict between different nations and religions as an essential part of their life's work.

I owe very particular thanks to two people from this original group. Ricky Emanuel and Helen Muller met with me on a monthly basis over the last eighteen months to read the drafts of the chapters I was writing for this book. Their constructive criticism, their knowledge and insights, their support in keeping me to task, have been invaluable. I am grateful to Kate Stratton for her careful editorial support. I am very grateful to Oliver Rathbone, Director/Publisher of Karnac Books, for his encouragement and eagerness to see the completed manuscript.

In 2021 I was contacted by Routledge, who had taken over responsibility for Karnac's titles, telling me that they wanted to bring out a new edition of my book, *Experiencing Endings and Beginnings*, and wondered whether I wanted to make any changes to it. I answered, telling them that I was keen to add another chapter dealing with mental and emotional aspects of people in their late 80s, 90s and beyond. They agreed to look at the manuscript and accepted it in July 2022. I am grateful to the editors at Routledge for including a new chapter to this edition of the book.

I would like to express my very warm thanks to my friend Lillian Levy for her generosity to volunteer to transcribe and type up the new Chapter Fourteen, Older still and close to death. Her contribution is greatly appreciated.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Isca Wittenberg** is a consultant psychoanalytic psychotherapist for children and adults who has worked at the Tavistock Clinic for twenty-five years and was vice-chairman of the Tavistock for ten years. She was a senior tutor in the clinical training of child psychotherapists, has led infant observation seminars in London for fifty years, and trained analysts and psychologists in Vienna and Oslo in infant observation. She has lectured and run seminars in Austria, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, and Sweden, and run workshops in Australia and South Africa. She has held temporary professorships at the universities of Turin and Klagenfurt.

She subsequently worked primarily in private practice, doing brief and long-term psychotherapy. She has been made a lifetime honorary member of the senior staff of the Tavistock Clinic where she did some teaching as well as facilitating experiential groups. She has published many articles in professional journals, contributed chapters to a number of psychoanalytic books (including two on autism), and written two books: *Psycho-Analytic Insight and Relationships: A Kleinian Approach* and *The Emotional Experience of Learning and Teaching* – the latter including contributions by Gianna Williams and Elsie Osborne. Both books have been translated into many languages.



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## PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

In her late eighties, Isca Wittenberg's mind is young. It is such a pity we have to die when the mind is still developing. Couldn't we instruct the body to wait until the mind has reached the end of its journey? No doubt the body would reply: "Well, when it comes to Isca Wittenberg I would have to keep going, like Methuselah, until 969 years of age." What is so heartening about this book about endings and beginnings is Isca's frank admission that only lately (giving hope to those of us who have not yet reached eighty) has she realised that her own shocking upheaval in the event of Hitler's tyranny, which brought to an end a peaceful life in Germany and the start of life in England as an "enemy alien", so focused her mind upon endings and beginnings.

She teaches us that a new environment stimulates into life a new mental state within us. Recent research has confirmed this.<sup>1</sup> The failure to adapt the mind to the new circumstance always has consequences either great or small, and even the small are not so small once we examine the whole situation carefully. We often don't realise that we have moved from one environment to another. We go so often from home to work that we may not take in what a huge transition that is. It is also very alarming to realise that, in response to a new environment, a quite different person emerges. We are all multiple personalities. What Isca

does is to draw our attention to these changed environments and by bringing these into awareness we then establish a continuity at a deeper level within ourselves. Awareness always implies that an aspect of the mind is embracing the flow of changes that are occurring. It was Martin Buber who pointed out that causality

... is no unbroken sequence but an ever new flashing forth of power and moving out towards its production; it is a volcanic movement without continuity ...<sup>2</sup>

and he goes on to say that continuity is achieved through the agency of a "magic power". Isca, as witness to us in this book, has this magic power that enables her to be acutely aware of the changed environments.

In this investigation Isca travels from the womb to death. There are so many beginnings and endings. The baby ends his life in the womb and is suddenly cast into a frightening new environment. Isca draws on her enormous experience both of infant observation and of treating young children in psychoanalysis. Of course she not only treats children and adolescents but also adults. She gives the most illustrative cases and shows how the behaviour of young babies differs hugely, as is also true of her adult cases. She shows how mothers manage the very different emotional behaviour of their newborn babies. Just as no adult couple is the same as any other so, too, no two mother-baby couples are ever the same. But Isca draws attention to another dimension. She emphasises that the baby is not only drawn lovingly to her mother but also that the baby is drawn to something beyond. In a letter which she wrote to me six years ago, after I had sent her a paper about reverence of children for their parents, she said:

My feeling is that dependence does include fear as well as love but reverence implies an awareness of goodness which starts at the baby's wonder at mother's goodness ... I believe that the baby of a few months, looking at mother adoringly, is aware that she contains something that is both hers but also not hers – an endowment which has been given.

In this way she is again in tune with Martin Buber's view that the baby, from the earliest year, in the womb even, stretches out beyond mother to the whole world. It is that "beyond" that captivates Isca's soul. It is

reminiscent of that remarkable man Macneile Dixon who, in the Gifford Lectures in 1935, said:

The first and fundamental wonder is existence itself. That I should be alive, conscious, a person, a part of the whole, that I should have emerged out of nothingness, that the Void should have given birth not merely to things, but to me. Among the many millions who throughout the centuries have crossed the stage of time probably not more than a handful have looked about them with astonishment, or found their own presence within the visible scene in any way surprising.<sup>3</sup>

It is this vision which characterises the spiritual dimension. So much of our thinking within the social sciences, within psychology, within psychoanalysis, is rooted in the assumption that the purpose of living is the struggle for survival, that it takes Isca to take us out of this. In this way she is in the tradition of Viktor Frankl, Macneile Dixon, and Tolstoy, who all thought that there was in life a purpose higher than the struggle for survival.

There is an underlying theme to all Isca's essays in this book: the spiritual dimension that underpins human experience. It is very significant that she places the spiritual not as something aside from human experience but as something within it. This is so important that, unless emphasised, it could be missed. The spiritual is not something aside from human communication and experience but *in* it.

In these chapters she treats young children, watches with care and concern the reactions of babies to being weaned and their mothers' experience of weaning, listens to elderly men and women who have retired from work, talks to the very old who are edging towards the gateway of death. In all these cases Isca helps these people not only to accept their changed situation in life but to see fresh opportunities and purposes in the new environment in which they find themselves. As one looks to see what it is that Isca has done to help them, there does not at first glimpse appear to be any amazing new insights or profound psychological intuitions. So what is it that Isca has done? I think it is quite simple: she is sympathetic to the pain of those who approach her for help. She listens and offers sympathetic understanding, and this helps the person who has approached her. She is in touch with pain. Listening to these accounts which Isca shares with us gives conviction to a truth that has

been known by wise people for centuries: that a pain shared, a pain that is understood, does not remove the pain but heals the soul. But why? Because the sufferer is no longer on his own, or her own, but in a shared communion with others. It does not mean that Isca just listens and that the patient's pain is the same as her own. If this were true it would be a disaster for the patient because then he or she would be moulded into the contours of another's pain. It is that Isca is able to see into the particular pain of this person who has approached her for help. She can only do this because she is able to experience her own pain, to step aside from the particularity that is hers and see the pain of the other. She does not think that her pain is the same as the other's pain but her own pain – and her reflection upon it – enables her to see the pain of the other. It is her ability to reflect upon it that is healing for the patient.

It is because Isca is able to know her own pain, then stand outside of it as an observer and see that this is *her* pain and not the pain of anyone else, that she is able to see the other as other, and the other's pain as his or her pain. The root, however, of her understanding comes from her own self-knowledge and it is knowledge of her pain and not of anyone else's that enables her to see into the particular pain of the other.

This ancient wisdom is confirmed by the fact that Isca frequently throws her own experiences into this book. So one senses that when people approach her, they do not feel that here is someone superior to them, someone who will listen patronisingly, but rather someone who is also in the human community and has suffered and suffers just as much as the patient or maybe more. It is not that she tells them her own experiences but that they sense she is their equal. The patient then no longer feels an alienated being but rather one in the midst of life, someone in the human community. A shared pain is a pain that has had the poison siphoned out of it.

This brings me back to what I have said about the spiritual dimension, which is central to her vision of life. This sense of a shared communion implies that there is knowledge that life is more than a struggle for survival; that life has a purpose that goes beyond the practical necessities for survival. She tells of the sad case of a man whom she was able to help whose twenty-three-year-old grandson was killed in a car crash. No one can take away the tragedy of an event like this. Our human lives are studded with disasters that are outside our control. The spiritual dimension teaches us that life, even in the midst of such tragedies, has meaning. This is something that Viktor Frankl managed to hold onto

even in the most dire of human circumstances when he was in the concentration camp.<sup>4</sup> Isca did not suffer this, the most horrific torture and shame of our generation, but she was close to it. Her father was in one for a short while. So, like Frankl, she did not become bitter or cynical but lived instead knowing that pain is part of life, managed to embrace it in herself, and so then those who sought her help sensed that here was someone who was able to endow them with new hope for their changed circumstances.

*Neville Symington*

### *Notes*

- 1 See Brooks, D. (2011). *The Social Animal: The Hidden Sources of Love, Character and Achievement*. New York: Random House.
- 2 Buber, M. (1937). *I and Thou* (pp. 35–36). Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith. Second Edition (1958), with a postscript by the author. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark.
- 3 Macneile Dixon, W. (1958). *The Human Situation* (pp. 72–73). Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- 4 Frankl, V. (1962). *Man's Search for Meaning*. London: Hodder & Stoughton.



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## *AUTHOR'S NOTE*

Much of the clinical work described goes back over very many years; it has therefore not been possible to contact and thank all of those patients I have worked with. I do want to express how deeply indebted I feel to them for enriching my experience.

I have used the male pronoun when writing more generally, and changed names when giving descriptions of the clinical material in order to preserve confidentiality.

I have used the term "projection" in parts of the text although the correct psychoanalytic term for the mechanism involved is "projective identification" (the omnipotent phantasy of being able to split off, temporarily get rid of, parts of one's personality and put them into another person or, alternatively, to communicate unbearable anxiety; for instance the baby is able to act in a way that engenders in the mother feelings he does not want to have or which he wants his mother to have and respond to). The mechanism may be used by persons of any age in relation to another. I have used the term "projection" in the text as this may be less confusing for the lay readership.