

Sex, Spirituality and Evolution

by Mark Harris for Conscious Choice, February 1999

What is our nature when it comes to love? To what extent do animal instincts lurk under cover of our "civilized" manner? Are they expressed through habits, customs, ideas, and the ways we relate to -- and possibly, hurt -- each other? Why do we talk about "the war of the sexes?" Are men and women really so different that we must rely on a deluge of self-help books and assorted apostles of personal growth to discover the elusive clue to getting along?

Cultural historian Riane Eisler has much to say on these topics. She is the author of the international best-seller, *The Chalice and The Blade: Our History, Our Future* (HarperSan Francisco, 1987), a work described by anthropologist Ashley Montagu as the most important book since Darwin's *Origin of Species*. More recently, she is the author of *Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body* (HarperSan Francisco, 1995), an insightful examination into the ways "humanity's 5,000 year detour into endemic social violence, cruelty, and pain" finds its reflection in the most intimate of human relationships -- our sexual relationships.

Eisler's scholarship bursts many myths. She debunks the idea that human beings are inherently violent or that history is only a lesson in second-class female servitude. And she refutes the idea that gender relations must, by nature, be inherently conflicted. In her view, early human culture reveals a different legacy, one in which for many thousands of years sexuality was not defined by sin, shame, and subjugation but was celebrated as a sacred and spiritual expression of the innate beauty in life. In this legacy is revealed the human story of love as the highest expression of evolution on the planet.

CC: TO START, LET ME ASK YOU ABOUT YOUR VIEW, AS YOU DESCRIBE IN SACRED PLEASURE , THAT IT'S THE EVOLUTION OF OUR CAPACITY FOR LOVE -- NOT VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION -- THAT MOST DEFINES WHO WE ARE, BIOLOGICALLY AS WELL AS CULTURALLY. WHY IS THIS? IS IT BECAUSE HUMANS GO THROUGH SUCH A LONG PERIOD OF CHILDHOOD DEPENDENCY?

Eisler: Yes, that's right. In evolutionary terms, the instinct for love, for altruism, is rooted in part in the extraordinarily long period of maturation for the human baby. When the baby is born, the brain is not fully developed. They couldn't get through the birth canal if it were. So the brain continues to develop during these early years. The child is thus totally vulnerable, dependent; and so we have the evolution of love. It is an adaptive evolutionary mechanism.

But there is another element at work here, as the Italian biologist Humberto Maturana notes, which is human sexuality, that pleasure bond that Masters and Johnson spoke about. The sexual bond produces neuropeptides that reward us with enormous sensations of pleasure, as happens not only when we receive love but when we give love, caring, and pleasure.

Of course, it's obvious, isn't it, that love and altruism are all around us? Love goes to friends, to partners, to communities. In a more evolved human being, there is the kind of love that we think Jesus had. What we're really talking about is empathy -- empathic love. Do you know there are studies showing that when newborn babies hear the cry of another baby, they cry? If they hear a recording of their own cry, they do not cry. What does that tell us about our innate need and ability for empathic love? We are born with it.

CC: BUT THERE ARE SCIENTISTS WHO COUNTER THAT HUMAN BEINGS ARE ACTUALLY BORN SELFISH. THAT'S THE STAND TAKEN BY SOCIOBIOLOGIST RICHARD DAWKINS, WHO WROTE A BOOK A WHILE BACK CALLED THE SELFISH GENE . SOME WRITERS FROM THIS SCHOOL OF THOUGHT CLAIM THAT SO MUCH OF WHAT WE LABEL AS "RATIONAL" IN THE CHAIN OF OUR IDEAS AND THOUGHTS -- AND THE BEHAVIOR THAT FOLLOWS -- ARE REALLY JUST EXPRESSIONS OF PRESET NEURAL

CIRCUITS AT WORK IN OUR BRAINS. CERTAINLY IT'S A POSITION MANY PEOPLE DON'T HAVE TROUBLE BELIEVING, CONSIDERING THE STATE OF THE WORLD.

Eisler: The theory that we have a "selfish" gene is just that, a theory, founded upon absolutely no evidence. Yet it is propagated as if it is the gospel truth. I don't want to lump every single sociobiologist into the same category, but the kind of sociobiological theories that tend to get popularized present what I call a dominator way of relating as the only human possibility. This is the model of human relations, as I describe in my work, in which males are ranked over females; violence and abuse are systemic and institutionalized; the social structure is hierarchic and authoritarian; and coercion is a major element in sexuality. And it's all supposed to be just human nature.

These ideas are today also propagated by a group of scientists who call themselves evolutionary psychologists, but who truly don't seem to have a clue about either evolution or psychology. The notion that there is no such thing as altruism is based on the neo-Darwinian theory of kin selection. In other words, if you do something altruistic, you're protecting your genes so you can pass them on. Well, what about the people in Nazi Germany who took in Jews, total strangers, knowing that not only they but their whole families would be killed if they were discovered? Where is the kin selection there? It doesn't make sense.

Darwin also wrote a book called *Descent of Man*, in which he very explicitly said that natural selection, random selection, survival of the fittest, simply do not apply as the only factors, and certainly not as the primary factors, when it comes to human evolution. There is also the very important factor that he called "the moral sense."

CC: PERHAPS WE COULD SAY THAT OUR LIFE EXPERIENCE CAN BE AS ENGRAVED IN OUR NERVOUS SYSTEMS AS EMPHATICALLY AS ANY GENETIC PREDISPOSITION? THUS, PEOPLE WITH A GENETIC PREDISPOSITION TOWARD ALCOHOLISM MAY OR MAY NOT BECOME ALCOHOLICS, DEPENDING UPON THEIR ENVIRONMENT AND WHAT HAPPENS TO THEM IN LIFE, THE KIND OF UPBRINGING THEY HAVE. LIKewise, PEOPLE MAY GROW UP TO BE ESSENTIALLY LOVING PEOPLE, OR THEY MAY BECOME VIOLENT AND CRUEL.

Eisler: We probably have a genetic predisposition to just about every conceivable behavior. But I will argue quite strongly that we humans have a much stronger disposition for love than we do for cruelty. Let me say, also, that there is a lot of mythology that men are predisposed toward violence. I don't believe that. But even if it were true, it's all the more reason not to systematically teach little boys violence, as we do in most societies today.

If you think about military training, for example, which traditionally many men have gone through, there's an element of trauma built into the experience, with its initiation through humiliation by males in a superior rank. What is interesting about this is how it basically replicates the experience of dominator values of child-rearing, which is also a very degrading experience. The child is led to believe that the only way to achieve love is to unconditionally obey.

As a cultural historian and systems analyst, what I would suggest to you is that there is a continuity to dominator values and ideas, whether they're expressed in the ways we're raised as children, the ways we're trained as soldiers, or the ways we're taught to think of ourselves as men and women. It's about cultural and social -- not genetic -- patterns. And there is trauma at its core.

In the "war of the sexes," of course, it is women who in dominator thinking are the "declared losers." If you are a properly feminine woman, you learn not to fight back, to just submit. The "good" woman, not the "slut" or the woman who manipulates, but the one who invests everything into her relationship with a man, is led to believe that all her needs are going to be met by this man. Well, that's impossible. Especially when male socialization teaches men that love is really just sappy woman stuff. "Real" life [for them] is about fighting and competing with other men.

Yet even within this system, women have always had some power because of sexual attraction. One of the ways women have gotten back at men is through rejection and ridicule. And if you're a man whose sense of masculine power does not include being rejected or ridiculed, this then becomes doubly painful. So it's all a mess, the whole situation is so dysfunctional!

The sad thing is we then have popular books that make us think that the communication problems between men and women, which are very real, aren't learned but are built into who we are. The end result is a set of stereotypes about masculinity and femininity that are truly a prescription for misery. In my view, there would not have to be a war of the sexes, if it weren't for the issue that one has to control and one has to be controlled.

CC: IN *SACRED PLEASURE* YOU WRITE ABOUT HOW, "AS WE MAKE CHANGES IN OUR PERSONAL ATTITUDES, BEHAVIORS, AND RELATIONSHIPS, WE ARE ALSO EMPOWERED TO CONSCIOUSLY WORK FOR SOCIAL CHANGE, WHICH IN TURN SUPPORTS FURTHER PERSONAL CHANGE." THIS LEADS TO ANOTHER QUESTION. IT'S NOT UNCOMMON IN THE SO-CALLED NEW AGE MILIEU TO HEAR PEOPLE SORT OF CONFESS HOW BACK IN THE '60S OR '70S THEY WERE INVOLVED IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS BECAUSE THEY THOUGHT AT SOME LEVEL, PERHAPS UNCONSCIOUSLY, THAT BY FIXING WHAT WAS "OUT THERE" -- ADDRESSING SOCIETY'S EXTERNAL PROBLEMS -- THEY COULD SOMEHOW FIX WHAT WAS WITHIN, FIX THE PAIN IN THEIR OWN HEARTS.

But now, so the thinking goes, they have come to realize that the real transformative work begins (and perhaps ends) with their own inner healing or personal growth. Cultivate the love within and it will become a kind of spiritual force for the love without, and the world is thus transformed.

Eisler: Historically this has never worked, I'm sorry to say. There have always been people who thought, if you just work on yourself, become a better person, and if enough of us do this, the world will be transformed. But what brings change is when systems change, systems that make it possible for us to express ourselves more fully, to give and receive more love, to be less humiliated, less degraded, to not be tortured or killed.

Our lives today are profoundly different as a result of the democratic revolutions in the West over the past 300 years. We no longer live under sanctioned systems of hereditary or military imposed rule, for example. We are not forced to worship a state religion or work as indentured laborers. These changes were all the result of collective action that brought about systemic change. I think we had better become more historically literate.

Of course, I am also the first to understand the importance of working on your personal stuff. My whole analysis is that among the most important social movements of our times are those addressing patterns of domination and violence in intimate relations, in parent-child relations, in gender relations....

So, I do believe there is hope in the personal growth movements. But, if all you do is work on yourself, on your own relationships, then you're not really providing for your children's future, are you? Because your children are living in a world in which patterns of institutional and cultural organization threaten their future.

In my own life, there were years when I truly tried to adjust, to fit into traditional gender roles and a system I was told again and again was just the way things are. I went a bit numb in those years, I should say. My health was actually affected. So I learned from experience that denying the world, so to speak, doesn't work. You may think it's working, to get cynical about things, to say, "Well, you know, you can only live for the day, only think about yourself. And forget social change, because it's all so big."

Of course, life is not a television show in which we're going to solve all the problems in half an hour. But I do know that every single progressive movement, all the way from the 1700s to the 1900s and now approaching the year 2000, has been a challenge to entrenched traditions of domination. To a large extent, these movements have also been successful. Empirically, the evidence is there. Social action by a handful of people, often initially highly unpopular people, can in the long run make a huge difference.

I can also tell you that my work has brought me in touch with so much that is positive and hopeful, with so many people committed to transforming themselves and their world. I consider myself blessed in this way, to know so many people who define courage not in anger or hate but in caring, for those they love as well as for strangers, and even when it means standing up to injustice. I believe there is much to be optimistic about.

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