



THE
RECOVERY
OF *love*

PAPER SEVEN

*Pathways: Partnerships
and Relational Being*

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As the old patriarchal culture begins to break down, or at least, of necessity, is being challenged more widely, new forms of discourse are being presented to us. We might say ‘of course they are’, because that is the way of things, the ever-present movement from and towards, the natural response to error and danger. But however that might be, examples are needed and they are there. The two texts I have chosen by way of example of this are Riane Eisler’s and Douglas P. Fry’s discussion of the shift from ‘dominance’ to ‘partnership’, and Kenneth Gergen’s notions of relational being. Each of these has to do with wholeness and connection, and each presents a challenge to the established and damaging discourse of separation, division and conflict.



In the late 1980s, the systems scientist and cultural historian, Riane Eisler, published a book called *The Chalice and the Blade*,¹ which explored the ways in which the cultures of the goddesses were overtaken by a culture of gods, and then by a single male God, Yahweh. In the last chapter of this book, she introduced what she termed as a new view of reality, *a movement away from dominance and towards partnership*. Thirty or so years later, and after further extensive thought and research, together with her co-author, the peace anthropologist, Douglas P. Fry, she took this theme forward into a book called *Nurturing Our Humanity*, with the subtitle of *How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives and Futures*.² Again, this is a book with a long reach back into the evolutionary development of humankind, and it describes both a path taken and one that may be taken.

The key message of the new book is that the cultures that replaced the world of the goddesses were cultures of conquest and conflict, cultures in which the good of the people was thought to rest in the dominance of the few, nearly all of whom were men, and beset with rigid hierarchies and rankings. Eventually, these forms of dominance became so hard-wired into our brains that they were seldom questioned. Nevertheless, pointing to recent

knowledge coming from neuroscience, the authors say that it is now understood that domination-oriented societies are extremely stressful, and that stress can inhibit our capacity for empathy and mutuality:

[Stress] stems from the conflation of caring and coercion built into domination childrearing, leading to denial (including identification with the ‘strong’) and deflection of fear and rage to out-groups. The socialization of males to equate masculinity with domination and violence is still another source of stress, as is the attendant devaluation of anything stereotypically associated with ‘inferior’ women (such as caring, caregiving, and non-violence). All this manifests itself in the development of neural structures primed for fight, flight or freeze, which promote fear and denial, suppress empathy, and constrict consciousness of a partnership alternative.³

Domination cultures are also socially conditioned:

Once we connect the dots, we see that in a domination system, familial, educational, religious, political, and economic structures – *not* an imagined human nature wired for oppression and violence – are what gets in the way of our human capacities, indeed, propensities, for empathy, caring, and mutuality.⁴

In contrast to the established culture of dominance, the authors propose a culture of partnership. Whilst the components of the former are, hierarchy, ranking, the cultural acceptance of abuse and violence, and the belief that the rankings of dominance are inevitable, the components of the latter are an egalitarian structure, an equal partnership between women and men, a cultural rejection of abuse and violence, and a belief in human nature as being about empathy, and mutual respect.⁵ In the culture of partnership, typical human relations are seen as based upon precepts geared towards the social good rather than upon a narrow, more selfish, unjust and conflictual individual good.

The authors suggest that such partnership societies flourished

for millennia before the culture of dominance overwhelmed them and that they are, therefore, closer to our natural way of being. Indeed, they suggest that in the long evolution of humankind, “the movement towards a more partnership-oriented world has not failed – rather it is incomplete.”⁶

In clearing up mis-perceptions about the differences between ‘dominance’ and ‘partnership’, they highlight the following: whilst both types of culture may enjoy co-operation, the difference lies in the purpose of such teamwork, with teamwork in partnership cultures being concerned with human wellbeing and reciprocity rather than being harnessed to some form of exploitation; whilst both cultures may at times work within hierarchies, those in partnership cultures seek to empower not dominate; whilst competition may be present in either culture, it is less overt in partnership cultures, which are more concerned with excellence than supremacy; and whilst both cultural systems will experience conflict, in partnership cultures it will be used to facilitate creative solutions rather than division and antagonism.

And then, and it is one aspect of these proposals that I find to be of particular interest, the authors say that “with a movement towards the partnership side of the continuum, rigid gender stereotypes have begun to melt away.”⁷ In such cultures, for example in Finland, they say, gender roles are flexible, whereas “in domination systems they are rigid, with the devaluation of women and the ‘feminine’.”⁸

So in terms of my quest for an ungendered discourse, it would seem that in this ‘other language’ of partnership we can see a movement away from the masculine towards the feminine, and an inclination towards integration, collaboration and a care of one another. Or, to put it the other way round, it is these very qualities that are *required* for a culture of partnership. And, again of interest to me, the authors make it clear that the energy flowing through these qualities, and through this possible transformation, is the lost quality of Love. Echoing the underlying proposition of this set of papers, the authors of *Nurturing Our Humanity* say that in partnership both Love and the Feminine are recovered by what they call “our human need and capacity for love.”⁹

The feelings, motivations and behaviours we call love have deep evolutionary roots. Indeed, these roots go back millions of years before our species emerged...because immature mammals require care to survive.¹⁰

Love, say the authors, “is a dynamic that helps *explain* the emergence of humanity on both meanings of the word...[and] the emergence of our species would not have been possible without the emergence of caring and love.”¹¹

This quality of love is made possible by our larger and more complex brains. Indeed, “the evolution of this large, more complex brain may not have been possible were it not for the evolutionary movement toward nurturing love.”¹² Or perhaps the recovery of Love, for apparently in the Democratic Republic of the Congo live the bonobos, a primate closely related to humans. Unlike its other close relation, the chimpanzee, bonobos do not have a male-dominated social structure, “and their social relations are much more geared toward sharing and caring.”¹³ Interestingly, the bonobos’ use sex “as a means reinforcing social relations based on the give-and-take of shared pleasure rather than on coercion and fear.”¹⁴ Dominance does not enter into their sexual activity.

Bonobo society is not male-dominated. Females, particularly mothers, play key social roles. Bonobo males do not use sexual coercion against females, and female bonobos form strong social bonds and effectively cooperate to keep male aggression down.¹⁵

And so it is that an alternative evolutionary perspective emerges, one in which the first social bonds arise not from fear but between mothers and infants based on sharing and caring as the foundation for social bonds in later life.¹⁶ This offers us the possibility of “a more gender-balanced evolutionary narrative,”¹⁷ which the authors relate to archaeological findings that suggest the importance of women in the Palaeolithic or Old Stone Age:

Evidence for this new, more balanced evolutionary story has been accumulating in recent years. For example, archaeological

finds point to the importance of women in the Palaeolithic or Old Stone Age. The majority of stone carvings of this era are female figurines. And a recent analysis of the handprints sometimes found on the walls of famous cave sanctuaries show that the majority were female hands.

...

In the early Neolithic, too, female figurines are ubiquitous – until they rather abruptly disappear. Yet even after this cultural shift, female deities were still prominent. For example, the Egyptian goddess Isis was revered as a dispenser of wisdom, counsel, and justice, and in ancient Sumer the most widely worshiped deity was Inanna, the Goddess of Love.¹⁸

And, at the end of their chapter titled ‘Love, the Brain and Becoming Human’, the authors say this:

Without love – given and received – our lives would feel diminished in meaning. This deep human need for meaning is another motivation that cannot be explained in terms of the replication of genes or even by our sexual drive.

However, when it comes to the crucial question of whether our needs for meaning and love are met and whether our capacities for creativity and love are expressed or inhibited,... we need to consider whether a society orients to the partnership or domination end of the continuum.¹⁹

Later, you may not be surprised to note, they conclude not only that our capacities for creativity and love are best served in partnership, but that domination causes real damage:

The culture into which the child is born makes a huge difference... Families in domination systems typically are authoritarian and male-dominated, with stressful and punitive childrearing. [And] the damage done by this kind of childrearing goes further because children are taught that rankings of domination are normal and that they must submit to those in control.²⁰

Given my exploration of the Feminine, it is of interest to read that studies have shown that whilst we respond to stress in three basic ways – fight-or-flight, dissociation and tend-and befriend – each of these activates different neuro-chemical patterns and behaviours, and it is said that women cope with stress in their own way, frequently “by joining together to care for one another and for their own and others’ children.”²¹ Studies have shown that “the tend-or-befriend response involves oxytocin, vasopressin and other substances connected with bonding, caring, and care giving.”²² This tend-or-befriend response is clearly a form of partnering rather than domination, and it would seem that it may be ancient in its origin.

For the purpose of this paper, what I draw from Riane Eisler’s and Douglas P. Fry’s work is this: the assurance that love and nurture are part of being; that we have much to learn of this from women and from the feminine mode of being; that there is ‘another future’, one based upon collaboration and partnership; and that as we evolve we can leave dominance behind us.



I was introduced to Kenneth Gergen and his book *Relational Being*,²³ by my colleague Scherto Gill, and soon I found myself in a Zoom call with an elderly man, well someone like me, sitting in his study in America. I liked him at once, and I began to listen to what he had to say. It’s quite important.

Like many great truths, when you hear it it seems obvious – of course, it must be so. For what Kenneth Gergen writes about is the evident truth that despite what we may have been told we are never single, always part of. We can never be entirely separate. It just isn’t possible.

As historians report, the view of the individual as singular and separate, one whose abilities to think and feel are central to life, and whose capacity for voluntary action is prized, is of recent origin. It is a conception of human nature that took root only

four centuries ago, during a period that we now view as the Enlightenment. It was during this period that the soul or spirit, as the central ingredient of being human, was largely replaced by individual reason.²⁴

My attempt, he says:

is to generate an account of human action that can replace the presumption of bounded selves with a vision of relationship. I do not mean relationships between otherwise separate selves, but rather, a process of coordination that precedes the very concept of the self... We are always already emerging from relationship; we cannot step out of relationship; even in our most private moments we are never alone... [And] the future well-being of the planet depends significantly on the extent to which we can nourish and protect not individuals, or even groups, but the generative process of relating.²⁵

He invites us to move beyond cause and effect in understanding relationships and to “consider the world in terms of relational confluence.”²⁶ In our troubled time, this is a radical, vital and heretical proposition. To place the individual always within relationship with others, is to deny the dominant doctrine of individuality and separation. But given where that doctrine has taken us, it is necessary to say this, and refreshing to hear it said. For in using the word ‘being’ rather than ‘self’ we are asked to move beyond the constricted noun into the more fluid realm of verbs: “In being, we are in motion, carrying with us a past as we move through the present into becoming.”²⁷

Citing Wittgenstein’s account of the origins of meaning in language (language game theory) wherein the meanings of words are derived from their application within social relations, Kenneth Gergen challenges the intellectual tradition of individualism in which the self is conceived as an atomic, autonomous entity of bounded being, and suggests that independent persons do not form a relationship by coming together; rather, it is through the process of collaborative action (what he coins as *co-action*) that the

potentiality for independent persons can emerge – “the individual represents the common intersection of myriad relationships”.²⁸ In other words, we do not possess emotions, thoughts and self-awareness independent of relationships; rather it is because we participate in relational traditions that we recognize ourselves as having emotions, thoughts and a sense of self, offering the framework through which one can navigate and negotiate when, where, and how this sense of self can be performed. The self is constituted by a confluence of performative relationships, situated and constantly re-situated within new environments and contexts, both social and extra-social. As such, Kenneth Gergen’s concept of the self defies the tendency towards abstraction; it is ineluctably mediated by relational materiality. Thus, he writes: “The word ‘I’ does not index an origin of action, but a relational achievement.”²⁹

For Kenneth Gergen, then, all intelligible actions are *relational in origin and performance*. Isolated actions in themselves do not carry meaning. Even our most private and solitary moments are always already immersed in relational actions, operating within a social framework which prioritizes mutual interconnectedness and interrelatedness. Thus, he summarizes that “to be a person is not to exist in a fundamental state of freedom, but of constraint,”³⁰ the constraint of always being in relationship with the other. The very emerging into the world is an emergence into social, *relational* being; the first caress of our mothers forever casts us into webs of relational motion specified and respecified by soft, dynamic, ever-changing constraints described as a “vitalizing enchainment.”³¹ And this motion can be understood as a multidirectional process of *relational flow* marked by simultaneous “movement towards constraint, on the one hand, and an openness to the evolution of meaning on the other.”³²

One of the primary issues he identifies with the dominant ideology of bounded being is the primacy it places upon the closed self and its development as a fundamentally separate unit. Such a linear rationalization of the individual, he suggests, is symptomatic of broader tendencies towards the categoric separation of phenomena, people and concepts: “in a world of cause and effect, everyone clamours to be a cause.”³³ Thus the individualism of

bounded being pervades the ideological structures which undergird our economic, political and social systems.

As such, this critique presented through the concept of relational being is a basis for the practical application of relationality within society, from the level of personal relationships to broader political schema. We are presented with a worldview that goes beyond the identification of separable and dichotomized units – he-versus-she, I-versus-you, us-versus-them – and instead, we are asked to consider an understanding of meaning itself as co-created, where social reality is constituted fundamentally by *relatedness*. Each person is now a part of the ‘we’ or what Kenneth Gergen terms a ‘multi-being’; each person is embedded in an emergent web of continuously reiterating relational processes embodied through performance and action. In other words, the focus shifts from the individual dancers to the dance; from the ‘essence’ to the ‘way’;³⁴ from the individual musicians to the music-making. Furthermore, this proposition distinguishes between two types of relational process – those which are generative and those which are degenerative.³⁵ While the former is catalytic, capable of injecting relations with creative vitality, the latter is corrosive, bringing co-action to an end, and moving towards a “condition of alienation,”³⁶ most notably present in our dominant economic theory and practice.

The tradition of bounded being carries far beyond the daily experience of self and others. It is also realized in our ways of life and the structures of our institutions – schools, businesses, and democracy itself.³⁷ ... As the father of economic theory, Adam Smith characterized human action, it is essentially based upon self interest...[and] a calculous if self-gratification is central to all human action.³⁸

On this view, even human love is a matter of making a profit, all values are abandoned save market value. Economic interests are pursued to the exclusion of all else, and the “longstanding and much cherished tradition of the individual self carries with it enormous costs.”³⁹

It is therefore useful, says Kenneth Gergen, to “envision forms

of generative process, those in which new and enriching potentials are opened through the flow of interchange?"⁴⁰ His hope is that we might, "recast the discourse of the mind in such a way that human connection replaces separation as the fundamental reality?"⁴¹ And this is the exercise towards which I am drawn in this series of papers, for it seems to me that without developing and adopting a relational discourse such as this, we cannot even begin to tackle the present damage and potential catastrophe of our present lives, our present ways of being.

Endnotes

1. Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*, Harper and Row, paperback edition, 1988.
2. Riane Eisler and Douglas P. Fry, *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives and Futures*, Oxford University Press, 2019.
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5. Ibid. 99-100.
6. Ibid. 101.
7. Ibid. 104.
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14. Ibid. 57.
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17. Ibid. 60.
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19. Ibid. 61.
20. Ibid. 80.
21. Ibid. 81.
22. Ibid.
23. Kenneth Gergen, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*, Oxford University Press, 2011.
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25. Ibid. xv.
26. Ibid. xvi.
27. Ibid. xxvi.
28. Ibid. 150.
29. Ibid. 133.
30. Ibid. 40.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid. 46.
33. Ibid. 51.

34. See Hall, David L., and Roger T. Ames. *Thinking from the Han : Self, Truth, and Transcendence in Chinese and Western Culture*. Albany, New York, 1998.
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36. Ibid.
37. Ibid. 20.
38. Ibid. 21.
39. Ibid. 27.
40. Ibid. 47.
41. Ibid. 62.