

The Power of the Soft Qualities to Transform Patriarchy

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Teaching, reading, and writing for a post-patriarchal world

Summary

Patriarchy emerges from scarcity, functions in separation, and results in powerlessness. Embracing the soft qualities restores capacity in the opposite direction: what was lost last is restored first, and we move towards individual and collective liberation instead of away from life.

Vulnerability and humility soften patriarchal habits of protection and control as we restore choice. That strength makes possible deepened awareness of interdependence, and tenderness for self and other, as we restore togetherness. Mourning together what we have lost, and celebrating what we still have, may support enough capacity for restoring flow through embracing generosity and receptivity. Creating collective islands of liberation supported by systems and agreements oriented to purpose and values, within capacity, and embedding the soft qualities make it possible for individual and collective capacity to increase.

Each of us had our first encounter with patriarchy in a small body that is ‘a bundle of needs’,¹ fully dependent on others to care for our most basic needs, and alone. Biologically, ‘a baby is born in the operational trust that there is a world ready to satisfy in love and care all that he or she may require for his or her living, and is therefore not helpless’.² Socially, anywhere from within seconds to within months, this trust is undermined.

Instead of active care for our needs, for everyone’s needs, the patriarchal world we are born into views needs as a problem rather than life’s unfolding.³ Whether it be taking baby away from mother, feeding on a schedule, or, somewhat later, being told what to do or not do once we’re able to move, our needs are thwarted as a routine practice, a core element of socialisation.⁴ Helplessness is the experience of being at the mercy of others who are not responding to our needs; it’s not dependence itself.

From this existential experience of helplessness and aloneness, it’s no wonder most of us, males and

females alike, succumb to patriarchy and internalise its core mode of scarcity, separation and powerlessness.

With the entrenchment of patriarchal conditioning, systems and mindsets all over the planet now reaching existentially overwhelming dimensions, what would it take to transform our lives at the root?

In summary, here is what I am unpacking in the rest of this article: patriarchy emerges from scarcity, functions in separation, and results in powerlessness. We liberate ourselves, individually and collectively, by restoring capacity in the opposite direction: what was lost last is restored first, and we move towards life instead of away from life. A core of this journey is embracing the soft qualities as individuals, in relationships, and within communities and organisations. As we create collective islands of liberation supported by systems and agreements that are fully oriented to purpose and values, are within capacity, and embed the soft qualities, we then make it possible for individual and collective capacity to increase.

What Is Patriarchy?

I regularly get challenged on my use of the word ‘patriarchy’ to refer to the social and cultural arrangements we have in the overwhelming majority of the world. I am asked, often, to replace it with something else that isn’t ‘about men’. I am questioned about why I don’t use the term ‘domination paradigm’ instead. I lead monthly free conference-calls on the topic of ‘Overcoming Patriarchy’, to which people come to deepen their learning on how patriarchy shapes us, individually and collectively, and what we can do about it. People come, in other words, who are friendly to the idea that patriarchy exists and that it is foundational to our current set of crises. On one recent such call I was asked, again, to define how I use the word. And

this time, I chose to respond. This article is derived, mostly, from that response and other conversations on that conference-call.

I start with a caveat. I was in the field of non-violence for at least 15 years before I felt capable of coming up with my own definition of non-violence. It's far fewer years that I've been focusing intensively on studying and writing about patriarchy: its origin, its relationship with life and with needs, how it functions, and its significance for understanding and, if still possible, transforming the existential global crises facing us.⁵

It's not been long enough to distil all that I've learned into a definition. I can point to patriarchy, I can describe it, and I can speak of qualities that I associate with it. I don't have a definition.

My primary way of understanding patriarchy is as a fundamental orientation to being and living that is at odds with life. Before saying much more about what this means, I first want to say what I mean by life. When I say 'life' here I am referring to something that is nearly beyond words; and I mean it, literally. Neither poetry nor science can give us a true understanding of what life is or where it came from. And yet we are in and of life. And so it was, some time ago, that when a friend asked me how I define life, and despite my disbelief that anyone would ask anyone else this question, the words emerged, effortlessly: 'Life is the constant rearranging of everything in continual integration of all volitions.'⁶

In this short, unexpected framing, I am attending to three dimensions: form, essence and purpose. Intuitively and somewhat mystically, form comes first, though not exactly in the sense of time; essence is secondary; and purpose is last. In that sense of primacy that isn't about time, I would say that the form of life is flow, which I see as the absolute baseline of what life is – what I earlier referred to as 'constant rearranging of everything'. I would say that the essence of life is togetherness, interdependence or love – what I earlier referred to as 'continual integration'. It is secondary in that the flow gives rise, so to speak, to entities that then come together. I would finally say that the purpose of life is choice – what I earlier referred to as 'volition'. Choice as the expression and source of movement. Overall, I find simplicity in thinking of life as being about flow, togetherness and choice.

With that, I am now ready to speak of patriarchy more fully. Patriarchy emerges from scarcity, functions in separation, and results in powerlessness. It is at odds with life at all three dimensions of form, essence and purpose. Scarcity is loss of flow and is at the level of form. Separation is loss of togetherness and is at the level of essence. And powerlessness is loss of choice and is at the level of purpose.

All this requires quite a bit of unpacking. Given the primary focus of this article on how to respond to and transform patriarchy, the next three sections are by necessity somewhat cursory.

The Emergence of Patriarchy

My best understanding⁷ is that patriarchy emerged as a *response* to conditions of loss of trust in the flow of life and isn't an inherent feature of human life. Such loss of trust doesn't arise, in my understanding, from finitude itself, which is a basic fact of life on planet Earth. All human societies have had to deal with the reality of limited resources, and have devised multiple strategies for being in flow with those limits. There's a reason why so many indigenous cultures have adopted a belief that if everyone takes only what they need, no more and no less, there will be enough. This is what a fundamental trust in life and its flow looks like.

Based on my readings, what would lead to the immense loss of trust in life that gave us patriarchy comes from significant trauma on a collective level, following major calamities, either of a natural order (e.g. desertification or flooding) or from invasions. Such conditions stress all systems and ways of being that evolved to care for all by over-stressing groups' capacity to respond to fluctuating conditions. This is how I understand the original experience of scarcity: no amount of sharing is enough, and no prospect for recovery of capacity is visible. Scarcity, in other words, is a relationship with finitude that is based on trauma.

The word 'fear' doesn't come close to what such an experience could be, and I don't believe that any adult in a patriarchal world can actually have a visceral experience of what it might be like to experience the kind of trust in life that, apparently, was and is the natural state of being in matriarchal societies.⁸ Without grasping that kind of experience, we also can't grasp the depth of shock that being taken out of this experience into a foundational

collective trauma, a full survival-threat, would feel like.

My own understanding was aided both through reading about matriarchal societies and through engaging deeply with the evolutionary framework put forth by Humberto Maturana Romesin and Gerda Verden-Zöller in their book *The Origins of Humanness in the Biology of Love*. The core thesis of this book is that we parted ways from our closest ape cousins long ago, longer than otherwise hypothesised, and that we evolved in a lineage that has love as its primary characteristic. Love, in their understanding, is about how we relate to each other, biologically: it ‘means or entails mutual trust in total body acceptance with no manipulation or instrumentalisation of the relations’.⁹ In most mammals, including apes, this kind of love operates only between mother and child, and is replaced, among adults, in relationships of dominance and submission. Humans, on the other hand, have evolved in neoteny, the extension of childhood features into adulthood, and we are therefore dependent on love for our entire life.

However, as I understand it we didn’t evolve far enough from it to have lost that capacity for dominance and submission. We have just lost our tolerance for it, while still retaining the capacity itself. Thus, under conditions of major collective trauma, we went back in our evolution to behaviours that we had already lost. And we have been essentially in collective trauma ever since, passing it on systemically and inter-generationally.

How Patriarchy Functions

With loss of trust in the flow of life comes loss of trust in the human flow of sharing resources based on needs. Together, this loss means, specifically, losing trust in the core mechanisms of life that care for all that lives through an endless flow of energy and resources, supported by human creativity and conscious generosity and other-orientation.¹⁰ Understandably, at some point, in response to the trauma some of our ancestors turned towards accumulation, most likely in an attempt to prevent future scarcity. This was a fateful ‘moment’ in human social evolution, marking the beginning of converting natural abundance into the twin phenomena of artificial surplus and manufactured scarcity, simply by removing resources from circulation through accumulation.

That initial fissure, the crack in the fabric of living, would then keep growing. Once accumulation starts, two things become necessary: a way to protect and control the accumulated resources, and a way to justify the dramatic shift from flow based on needs to the state we’ve been in since, where some few have more than they need while the many others struggle to live as the fruit of their labour is funnelled to the few.

The first is what made all that had happened until then become patriarchy per se. Since regression to dominance and submission through trauma happened, it would be the males who would accumulate. Any attempt to control the accumulated resources would mean men controlling women, so that each man can pass what he has accumulated to *his* offspring, which can only be known through separating women from each other and controlling them.

The second is what gave rise to the perpetuation of separation, the second layer of patriarchy, through specific ways of thinking and organising society. My conjecture is that the justifying story for massive inequality is the story that says that those who have more deserve it, as do those who have less.¹¹ This notion is at the root of many other elements that carry potency to this day: fairness, justice and, later, equality and rights. What unites all of them is that they are not directly related to needs, and thus they constitute part of the tectonic shift from an orientation towards needs, which invites care and collaboration, to an orientation towards concepts, which invites rules and competition. This is how scarcity then leads to separation.

The fundamental mechanisms of patriarchy are all within a paradigm of separation. In order to find willingness to control, we must separate from that which would then be controlled, whether that be within us, in other people, or in life beyond the human.¹² The focus on ‘who deserves what’ becomes a core mechanism for how to distribute resources, regardless of who needs what or who has the resources that could support those who have a need. From here, it bleeds into how to respond to what others do, shifting from restorative responses based on needs and aiming to attend to what was broken and restore trust, to retributive responses based on which action deserves which reward or punishment. Actions are no longer evaluated in terms of how well they attend to needs and, instead, are measured against abstract notions of what is

right and what is wrong, a kind of thinking which has been with us since. While a needs-based orientation leads to integrative approaches to life and especially to solving problems, patriarchal thinking offers only either/or views of reality, where winning or losing are the only options, with compromise being the most collaborative pathway imaginable.

The Results of Patriarchy

Humans evolved to be social animals that collaborate to attend to needs through creatively using all available resources with the least impact possible. Our wisdom and our power lie in our togetherness.

Instead, with patriarchy came more and more divisions. First, between men and women, and between adults and children. Then came class, religion, caste, ethnicity and, eventually, race as further axes of division. As we are divided, and even with growing technological and information sophistication, our wisdom in relation to needs and resources diminishes: we are far less able to live well within the means of our planet than we ever have been. At present, we are collectively using 1.6 Earths for all of our current consumption, including absorbing waste, with no evidence of actual satisfaction of true needs for most of us as we contend with massive amounts of addiction, depression, chronic illness and violence around the world. We have crossed several of Earth's limits, and are within sight of the potential extinction of human life, caused by us.

In my sense of things, attempts to address the crises we are facing are within the same mindset that I see as their root cause. Much of the search for solutions aims for technological fixes that don't address our fundamental orientation of control, right/wrong thinking and other manifestations of separation. Many organisations working for change reproduce dynamics related to use of power born of patriarchy even while specifically aiming to transform them. Others operate with blaming, shaming and retributive approaches to conflict. Often, in movements for change, groups or leaders exert subtle and immense pressure to overwork and neglect basic needs. And in large part, I see much more focusing on opposing what is not working without fully articulating a clear vision of alternatives.

Lest I myself do the same in speaking of what others are doing, I want to now bring tenderness to all of us in understanding why these experiences persist. And all this, still, before speaking of the radical transformation I seek to strengthen within me and inspire others to embrace.

The Reproduction of Patriarchy

Unfortunately for all of humanity, it takes far less to keep patriarchy going than it took to set it in motion. What it took to set in motion, so very long ago before our collective clear memory, was massive collective trauma. What it takes to reproduce patriarchy happens to each of us individually and requires far less. It happens, almost invariably, at the hands of people who love us and want the very best for us, and still pass patriarchy on to us even while believing they are doing it for our own good.¹³ They do it through aiming to control us, training us for obedience, instilling in us ideas about what is right and what is wrong, making our belonging conditional on us fitting into what is believed to be acceptable – for anyone, for boys or for girls, for people of our class, for people of our religion, ethnicity or race. This is where the image with which I started this article comes back into focus: when our little bodies, designed for flow, togetherness and choice, encounter control and right/wrong thinking, we experience existential trauma. Each of us then face, freshly, without any support or guidance, the same raw deal: we either give up on the truth of our being, accept and internalise the rules, and 'buy' the modicum of conditional belonging we have, instead of the full togetherness that we long for, at cost to our access to choice and flow, or we learn to survive without it, in deep aloneness, struggling to be strong enough to maintain our sense of self in an environment that challenges everything we do.¹⁴

I don't want to minimise the difference between what happens to boys to train them to be men and what happens to girls to train them to be women, both within a patriarchal world. I do want to emphasise that patriarchy *happens* to both;¹⁵ it isn't chosen by any of us voluntarily, nor is it inherent in anything essential about biological dimorphism, including our different hormonal make-up.¹⁶ I believe every single one of us struggled mightily before giving up, boys and girls alike.¹⁷

Even in the rare instances in which a child isn't controlled or shamed at home, the entire social order

is organised on the principles of scarcity, separation and powerlessness, and reinforces them, making it near impossible for any of us to fully exit the patriarchal mindset. Our economy, based as it is on exchange and accumulation, deepens and reinforces scarcity and separation: each of us, in modern capitalism, born of patriarchy, is dependent on the good will of so many others from whom we are separated and with whom we are trained to believe we compete for scarce resources. Our methods of attending to conflict and harm are based on retributive justice, punishment, shaming and deepening separation.¹⁸ These are extended beyond violence per se and into a long list of behaviours that are deemed to be disruptive of the social order.¹⁹ Our ways of making decisions are based on command and control, majority vote or compromises, producing co-stupidity rather than wisdom.²⁰

From within and from without, patriarchy is all around us, presenting inner and outer obstacles to living within flow, togetherness and choice. As a small and trivial example: even writing this article, especially the part about describing what I mean by ‘life,’ took immense courage. When I first talked about these ideas with others on the conference-call on which this article is based, I was worried I would be seen as being nuts. Why would that even happen? Only because my description doesn’t fit patriarchal norms – in this case, norms of what counts as ‘knowledge’ and what is acceptable within it.

We live within a permanent trauma vortex that leads us to survival-level responses. This is where my tenderness comes in: under conditions of permanent trauma, it is extremely difficult to respond to patriarchal behaviour in non-patriarchal ways. Any time somebody does anything that embodies the scarcity–separation–powerlessness vortex of patriarchy, it re-creates that trauma for us, individually, even if on a tiny scale. To find non-patriarchal ways of responding requires spiritual fortitude, ongoing rigorous practice and/or solid support structures. Few of us have that capacity.

Antidoting Patriarchy with Softness

Neither individual healing nor fighting patriarchy will work. The former won’t because I find it impossible to imagine that enough of us, individually, could do enough trauma healing quickly enough to counter what is happening. The latter, because if we mount a campaign to fight patriarchy, we have already lost.

On a large scale, we are unlikely to have sufficient war-powers to ‘win’, both because the ones who want to stand up to patriarchy are in general less well-armed, and because we tend to have more scruples than those who guard their cumulative property, even when we are willing to engage in armed struggle. And even if we ‘win’, I’ve yet to see any movement that took up arms managing to create a non-patriarchal result once in power. Unless we find a different way to move, we are going to continue our march towards human extinction, and to fascism, social-system collapse, and massive biosphere shifts along the way.

Similarly, on a small scale we cannot force ourselves or anyone else into choice; we cannot use shaming to re-create a broken connection or trust; and we cannot control anything to re-establish flow. Unless we respond from outside of the patriarchal field, our relationships will continue to erode, our communities and movements will continue to be rife with conflict and mistrust, and our individual lives will continue to be what they are now.

What, then, do we do? My starting-point is deep mourning, as we look without averting our gaze at the reality that we may not be able to turn things around and come back to life. Mourning, unlike anger, is soft. It directly antidotes the urgency that leads us to respond with patriarchal tools.

If we are going to create transformation on the scale that’s needed, within us, around us and in the world at large, nothing short of an entirely different approach to living will do. Here’s what I wrote about this in a recent newsletter:

In the last while, a clear picture of the magnitude of the task has found me; what it would take to shift the fundamental way that things are done. Those of us who have a picture of that shining, glorious, and astonishingly simple way of living that we know is possible (even if extremely unlikely) need to find a way to create a field with enough potency to be stronger than the patriarchal field within which we live. And the primary qualities that we need to create this alternative field are the many soft qualities that patriarchy repudiates: tenderness, vulnerability, compassion, generosity, humility, mourning. And this is not an exhaustive list.²¹

The soft qualities are completely looked down on within the patriarchal way of living, especially for boys and men. The qualities that are primary to

patriarchy – such as control, right/wrong thinking, either/or ways of being, dominance and hubris – are all harsh, intense and pointed. There’s a clear reason why Ian Suttie chose to speak of the *taboo* on tenderness, a very strong word for something as simple as tenderness.²² Restoring our capacity that’s been assaulted by patriarchy will require massive mobilisation to embrace all the soft qualities, and to set up sufficient support structures so we are not left to our own devices to do the monumental change that this requires. In the process, we contribute to liberation around us and beyond.

Precisely because there’s no way to know what will or won’t work, embracing humility means the willingness to act wherever we are, in relation to whomever is there, without knowing if anything will yield results. For me personally, it means always pointing my attention towards vision, and moving as far as I know how in that direction. Key to this is an ongoing intention to restore capacity for the necessary transformation at all levels at once. On the street, it may mean interacting differently with utter strangers, embracing generosity and celebrating what I see, especially collaborative parenting or gifting behaviours. When I teach, it may mean showing up with a vulnerability that clashes with norms of ‘professionalism’, aiming to continue to move my own liberation forward even while supporting others on their path. When engaging with an organisation, including those I am part of, it may mean looking at how to create systemic support for visionary collaboration, which may include needs-based resource distribution, integrative decision-making and restorative approaches to conflict.

Restoring capacity means, simply, restoring all the human qualities that patriarchy has taken from us. In a manner similar to any recovery from trauma, the movement often takes places in the reverse order from the onset of trauma. We lost flow first, togetherness second, and choice third. Hence it’s likely that we will restore choice first, togetherness second, and flow third. Grossly speaking, we need to have enough choice to be able to create togetherness, and we need to have enough togetherness to be able to create flow. We cannot create flow on our own, and we cannot create togetherness if we get lost within relationships without capacity for choice. In reality, because each of us has been affected by patriarchy differently, our journeys of liberation will also be entirely different from each other. Any gain in capacity anywhere will support us everywhere else.

And still, embracing the soft qualities isn’t random. Often enough, they specifically aid us in different parts of the journey of liberation. Vulnerability and humility soften the habits of protection and control which keep patriarchy going. This is no small task, and took me many years from when I adopted it as a primary path to reach a true sense of choice and freedom in my life.²³ We are habituated to seeing vulnerability as weakness, which is why few people embrace it. My own experience, and that of those who have accepted my invitation, is that accepting our vulnerability is a source of courage and strength.

With that, it is then easier to deepen our awareness of interdependence, and to access tenderness for self and other, which allows us to restore togetherness. Tenderness antidotes judgements and supports us in embracing the tragic lens instead of evaluating what isn’t aligned with our values or needs as wrong, whether it happens elsewhere or within us. Looking at what we all do through the lens of capacity, grasping the degree of horror that patriarchal conditioning brings to each new human, repeatedly allows me to recognise how much in the grips of incapacity we are. It rests on and strengthens faith that the narrative of patriarchy – that we must be controlled or else there can be no sociality – isn’t truth; it’s only a narrative, and we can choose another one that is more affirming of and aligned with life.

Grasping that patriarchy was a set of events, not a destiny written into our essence, has brought me waves and waves of deep mourning for what we have lost. Mourning requires strength, and that strength is rarely available to us on our own, because the calamities that humanity, and much of life beyond us, have endured are truly difficult to stay open to. Still, it’s a necessary practice. I have a weekly time when a group I invited meets with me to support me in mourning, and this practice is core to what gives me energy. I also provide spaces where people can mourn, specifically in relation to what is unfolding in the world these days.²⁴ The practice is intense, and with the willingness to surrender to it comes more capacity to envision alternatives, more creativity, more energy, and more capacity to mobilise to do the work of transformation.

The twin practice of mourning is the practice of celebrating even in the midst of immense difficulties. In addition to the obvious strengthening of the heart, this practice appears to actually rewire

the nervous system, in the moment, and realign us directly with capacity. It requires discipline, especially on difficult days, and it builds both individual and collective capacity when done as part of routine functioning of a group. Specifically, celebrations increase both generosity and receptivity, essential ingredients for restoring flow.

Both generosity and receptivity lean on trust in different ways, and in that way directly antidote the original injury of scarcity. They specifically are bold statements to challenge the fundamental breakdown of flow that exchange signifies. Generosity requires us to trust that we won't lack for resources if we give what we have. I don't know a better way to recover from scarcity quickly. Cultivating receptivity takes us to a different layer of the injury, the fundamental experience of having needs being a liability instead of a source of information for others about how to care for us. We have been deeply trained to believe that receiving without giving leaves us in a state of debt, at the edge of which there is no doubt unconscious and deeply ingrained fear of being enslaved.²⁵ When a group of people, a community or even a larger grouping, chooses to collectively uncouple giving from receiving, then it becomes an experiment in seeding flow, again, in the world.

Creating Islands of Love

I said earlier that I don't see a possibility of enough of us healing enough trauma as individuals quickly enough for that to be a path of liberation. I do see a different path that, if embraced widely enough, might stand a chance. This path is about creating communities of practice, commitment and support that take on the work of liberation, of restoring capacity in all these areas, as their purpose; and the vision of a world based on flow, togetherness and choice as framing their values.

Aligning in this way means that we focus on aligning with purpose and values in everything we do, individually and collectively. We rethink how we make decisions, how we generate and distribute resources, how we share information, how we give and receive feedback, and how we engage with conflict. We align this way individually, and we create systems that anchor our commitments in specific agreements that are fully based on capacity rather than aspiration: what is possible, not what is fair or right. And always with tenderness to catch us when we lack capacity.

So long as our agreements can hold us, we keep going. We mourn when we need to, we seek support when we need to, we celebrate, we give and receive, and we do only what we have willingness for and trust that the rest will be done as capacity exists elsewhere.

Only when we are no longer able, individually or collectively, to maintain our focus on purpose – only then do we reach for healing. This is healing focused on restoring blocked capacity, only enough to find the energy to move again towards purpose. I want to remember at all times that we can't heal everything. Instead, we can heal, laser-like, efficiently, in a focused way, what actually needs to be healed at any given moment.

Whether or not enough such collective experiments can take root and, together, create a reboot remains within mystery. We take on the practice without any capacity to predict or control any outcome, simply because we love life.

Notes

- 1 Alice Miller, *Banished Knowledge*, p. 48.
- 2 Humberto Maturana Romesin and Gerda Verden-Zöller, *The Origin of Humanness in the Biology of Love*, p. 214.
- 3 A modern variant of this view is deeply embedded in the field of psychology, resting on Freud's reduction of all human needs to two intrinsically insatiable drives, from which arose the assumption that adapting to a reality in which our needs cannot be met is the task of each individual. See Chapters 7 and 8 in 'Beyond Reason', my unpublished doctoral dissertation, for an extensive analysis of this point.
- 4 See also my article 'From obedience and shame to freedom and belonging' on academia.edu.
- 5 See 'From obedience and shame' (note 4) and 'Why patriarchy is not about men', the two main pieces I've written so far.
- 6 Against our modern, rational (hence patriarchal) and materialistic ways of making sense of life, I have adopted as an indefinitely temporary working assumption that everything is alive, everything has volition, including cups, electrons and mountains. I don't think of such volition as anything that resembles our human volition. And still I find that mystery deepens and thickens, and imagination flows, when I adopt this perspective: that everything is alive, everything has volition.
- 7 See, for example, *The Rule of Mars* (ed. Cristina Biaggi).
- 8 See, for example, *Societies of Peace* (ed. Heide Goettner-Abendroth).
- 9 *The Origin of Humanness* (note 2), p. 69.

- 10 Here the work of Maturana and Verden-Zöller on the biology of love is complemented by the work of Genevieve Vaughan, for example in her book *The Maternal Roots of the Gift Economy*, as both point to extended childhood as key to understanding human other-orientation.
- 11 See my ‘Deserving, gifting, and needs’ (2019) for a more detailed discussion of this point.
- 12 See the chapter ‘Controlling to death’ in my book *Spinning Threads of Radical Aliveness*.
- 13 See Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good*, for significant detail of how this unfolds.
- 14 See Miki Kashtan & Arnina Kashtan’s ‘Parenting without obedience’ for a broader analysis of these phenomena.
- 15 And as difficult as it is for us, women, to own, much of it at the hands of women.
- 16 Since I learned that being around young children for substantial periods of time decreases testosterone – enough to reduce aggression, not enough to interfere at all with fertility – I have been wondering about the extent to which how we know ourselves to be, even physiologically, is so much a result of patriarchal millennia that we can barely know what we would have been like without it.
- 17 I believe that in some ways, boys experience more brutality than girls because they will be required to uphold patriarchy without any external threat of violence to them as men. In order to be willing to play a dominant role within patriarchal society, boys must learn to separate sufficiently from self and other. I wrote more about this in two blog posts: <https://thefearlessheart.org/why-patriarchy-is-not-about-men/> and <http://thefearlessheart.org/metoo-and-liberation-for-all/> (both accessed 2 October 2020).
- 18 According to James Gilligan, such mechanisms, when applied to violence, only enhance the presence of violence. See *Violence: Our Deadly Epidemic and Its Causes*.
- 19 See my article on the role of police in capitalism – <https://medium.com/@MikiKashtan/responding-to-breakdown-of-trust-in-police-c398eca80d82> (accessed 2 October 2020).
- 20 See Tom Atlee’s writings on the Co-Intelligence website and in his books.
- 21 See <https://myemail.constantcontact.com/Do-We-Stand-a-Chance-.html?soid=1011233438572&aid=0GFzr8ruY68> (accessed 2 October 2020).
- 22 See Suttie’s *Origins of Love and Hate*.
- 23 See <https://baynvc.org/vulnerability-as-a-spiritual-path/> (accessed 2 October 2020).
- 24 These are monthly free conference-calls named ‘Reckoning with Collapse’.
- 25 See David Graeber, *Debt: The First 5000 Years*, for the history that explains how slavery emerged from debt economics.

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About the contributor



Miki Kashtan is a practical visionary pursuing a world that works for all, based on principles and practices rooted in feminist non-violence. Miki is a founding member of the Nonviolent Global Liberation community (NGLcommunity.org) and has taught, consulted, and engaged with projects globally. An Israeli native with significant roots in Mexico and New York City, she is now vagabonding in search of learning about liberation and community. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from UC Berkeley.

INVITED COMMENTARIES

Editor's note: When I read Miki's article, my immediate feeling was that this is one of the most important and insightful articles this journal has published in its near 50-year history. It felt important to mark this response by seeking several commentaries – and, unavoidably, at very short notice. I don't underestimate the impossibility of being asked to comment on this immensely rich and thought-provoking article in just 500 words! And I am therefore immensely grateful to **Jill Hall** and **Gavin Robinson** for attempting the impossible; and I hope their generous words will be just the beginning of a deep and lasting conversation across modern culture on this momentous article. As well as headlining in *Self & Society*, 48 (2), 2020, the article has been posted on the AHPb website home page at <https://ahpb.org/>; and we invite readers to share it far and wide – thank you.

Jill Hall writes:

I have never before come across an approach to the Transformation of Patriarchy with which I so thoroughly resonate as that of Miki Kashtan. What a wonderful and inspiring article. In my work as a psychotherapist I have long experienced patriarchy's confusing and diminishing effects on both women and men, and thus their offspring. As Miki states, 'Patriarchy is a fundamental orientation to being and living that is at odds with life' – as it is based on the notion and means of control, and we cannot control and love at the same time. I see it as an insidious intruder into the very heart and core of our being and all that it means to be a human being – the species on earth who are blessed with both the capacity to love and ever-evolving consciousness. Patriarchy misuses and distrusts both.

I see the rise and dominance of patriarchy, as we moved beyond our earth tribalism, as a reaction to the fact that we are all born of mother – we were merged with her in the womb. Her body carried us. However, we are also each unique (as revealed in our finger-prints used as proof of our identity).¹ I believe that we hold an essence of our own *as well as* merging with our mother and thus all that she is contending with in her own life during those vitally significant nine months. We thus each have wholeness *and* a wounding. Fortunately, paradox – if lived with an awareness and respect for that

paradox – can morph beyond its two contradictory positions. This is how both consciousness and wisdom evolve in the service of love.

So mother holds the primal significance for each of us, whatever our gender, a potency of another order than that of the father. Furthermore, men can never be sure if it is their genes that are being perpetuated – hence the need to control that fuels patriarchy and diminishes us all. The fact that females are born with XXY chromosomes and males with XY is also of interest. So women hold the potential for a greater flexibility and a different kind of resilience and range of thought and behaviour necessary for nurturing that utterly dependent new life. Men have been needed as enablers and protectors of this process of nurture, and have a different and more immediate kind of strength. Moreover, as patriarchy wanes, their feminine qualities can more easily flower, enriching their relationships in their different ways as both parents respond to that ‘bundle of needs’ in our early years.

As Miki so clearly illuminates, to fight patriarchy will not free humanity; it will only harden and reinforce it. A core patriarchal conviction is regarding vulnerability as a weakness rather than as an inherent aspect of being a human being – a humane being. If we human beings could bear to embrace our vulnerability and experience its connective potential we would be united in a shameless and caring support of each other. A salve for the pain and loneliness generated by the notion of attaining power and control over others – even those we love and long to be loved by. The richness and joy of real intimacy would no longer be rendered elusive or blighted. Power could be experienced as flexibility and resilience.

What a relief for all of us when Patriarchy becomes redundant.

Note

1 It always gives me cause for wonder that what we each offer to Collective Consciousness could never be given by any other.

JILL HALL runs weekend residential groups in Norwich, and has been a guest lecturer for various professional bodies and universities. She is the author of *The Reluctant Adult: An Exploration of Choice* (Prism Press, 1993).

Gavin Robinson writes:

It’s difficult not to agree with much, or indeed all of what Miki writes in this brilliant article. It is more, perhaps, about how to comment and perhaps add to what is written.

Fundamentally the loss of our togetherness that is embedded in matriarchy is something that is fundamental to our well-being. Governance in the United Kingdom and in the world in general is completely skewed by a patriarchal toxic stance. The current leader of Britain’s Labour Party, for instance, just recently (22 September 2020) spoke about the need for the party, who are supposed to support the less well off, to be patriotic. Whereas now we need to be caring for mother earth, as otherwise life on this planet will be unsustainable for most if not all of the human beings who live here.

We have evolved into *homo-neoliberalus* (Teo, 2018) from, perhaps, wiser beings found in cultures like the aboriginal cultures of the Americas and Oceania and much of the world, by emasculating them. The trauma of the desecration of these peoples by the invasion of predominantly Western powers in itself meant that much wisdom was lost, and much love with it. Trauma can only be truly healed with mourning of the loss, and this is a painful process, as Miki alludes to. The pain can only be transformed into release and relief, and there is much research and documentation to document this (see, for example, Penlington, 2019; Burch, 2008).

Can such a grieving happen in a very complex world of some eight billion people, where so few people in the world control the prevailing narrative? If we try and breach this, we risk the wrath of those who try and shame, rather than to face their own shame (see, for example, Claesson & Sohlberg, 2002; Duffell, 2017).

So, it is necessary to encourage the flow of communication so that we are not alone, as that is what shame brings on us. The few who have so much pain to avoid (see, for example, Duffell, 2017) can try and escape this shame, and the resulting pain, on their yachts and islands, and can treat the rest of us as a joke. We are the other who are not as important as them. So, we do need to form islands of love and to learn more the inner strength so that we do rewire our ‘plastic’ nervous system (for example, see Porges, 2011).

When Freud and others investigated the unconscious mind, and Jung brought into being the concept of the collective unconscious, there was some degree of enlightenment. However, Freud's cousin Edward Bernays then exploited what Freud discovered, as Bernays used this information of the unconscious to exploit our subliminal desires so that we consumed (Gunderman, 2015), so as to try and avoid our pain. While they stay in control of us, the masses.

Now we can appreciate and learn how to make the unconscious more conscious, in many therapeutic ways, so as not to need to be frightened by our survival mechanisms of fight, flight, freeze, submit and collapse into shame and other unhelpful states. We can learn our mothering side more, with less of the patriarchy that separates ourselves and each other. And to learn to be with the pain by mourning our losses that mean we are all human beings. Then perhaps we can move towards a more sustainable world.

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