

Families in Transition: From the Past into the Future*

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... what does education do, what does it have to offer, when deprived of its necessary partner, the future ...?
Graham Swift, *Waterland* (1992: 154)

Myths are things that never occurred but always are.
Sallustius

... we should certainly pay far more attention to the biological theory of domination-subordination.

This theory has sprung from the study of non-human primates like gorillas and chimpanzees. It has been discovered that their relative domination over or subordination to one another depends largely on size and (outside the periods when females are on heat) non-sexual factors akin to human self-confidence. Thus a large female and a small male in the same cage will be respectively the dominator and the subordinate; the male will 'present' (adopt female copulatory positions) as a sign of submission. We must realise that all humans adopt (or veer between) one or other of these roles irrespective of sex.

But of course human beings are not caged and live in far more complex situations; and it is the chain-reaction aspect of this relationship need that is the most dangerous for society.
John Fowles, *The Aristos* (1968:177–8).

I would like to start off by saying that it does not feel right to be up here on this platform. I feel most uncomfortable and *politically incorrect*. In this post-modern era, as I understand the implications of post-modernism (and I assume there must be someone somewhere who does) it is now important that, like Manuel in that marvellous British comedy *Fawlty Towers*, I recognise that 'I know nothing ... I know nothing'. All of YOU are the experts. Whatever I say, you will listen to and interpret my text in ways that speak of your preferred stories (I think that's the current buzz-phrase), you will construct your own reality about me and what I have to say. However, there is still a risk, one I guess I have to be prepared to take, that however *less-knowing-than-thou* I attempt to be, some of you might see me as taking an arrogant, modernist *knowing* stance in that, as Deborah Tannen, a professor of linguistics suggests,

Much, even most—meaning in conversation does not reside in the words spoken at all, but is filled in by the person listening. Each of us decides whether we think others are speaking in the spirit of different status or symmetrical connection. The likelihood that individuals will interpret someone else's words as one or the other depends more on the hearer's own focus, concerns, and habits than on the spirit in which the words were intended. (Tannen, 1991: 37)

Nevertheless, I will try to become as invisible as possible and try not to influence you.

I also want to say that I feel marginalised. I have become stereotyped as a disrespectful (even decadent according to the chairman's introduction) comedian. I desperately wanted my serious side, my concerned and sensitive side, to construct itself with you, to be brought forth with you in this session.

So my co-presenter, Sophie Holmes, and I also co-constructed an agreement that she would monitor my story and, in contrast to the savage attacks that some have experienced for not holding the correct political position (for example, I refer you to Eve Lipchik's paper in *Family Therapy News* (Lipchik, 1991) that asks why is it that people in the field of family violence are often so violent to each other). Sophie agreed to guide me and to put my thinking right with gentility and with respect and with an understanding that, whatever I

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ended up saying, I basically mean well and that we are both on the same side.

I am the son of an Anglican minister and a traditional, home-making, post-war housewife. Their wish for me was that I continue their transition upwards from working class origins, a transition that had substantially alienated them from their own families of origin so that my brother and I grew up with very little sense of being part of an extended *family-through-time*.

They wanted me to be a practising Christian and to be the medical doctor that my father had himself wanted to be but could not because of a hearing defect that developed during his teens. Naturally, I became an atheist and a rock-and-roll musician, later starting my own business selling hot dogs from a cart outside a major South London railway station. You see, I was very much like my father, whose own father, an engine driver and a staunch trade unionist, had no time for book learning and forced my father to study in secret. Books would be torn from his hands if he was caught reading them. 'You don't want to waste your time with that muck.'

In spite of the differences in our beliefs, we both shared a deep suspicion of sacred cows and the politically correct (although it was not called that, then) and particularly of the process by which the initially marginalised (for example, the early Christians), once they had found their voice and gained political power, often became the tyrants who defined orthodoxy and marginalised others (a process well portrayed in George Orwell's *Animal Farm*).

Through a series of serendipitous events I eventually found myself in this field (and though my father never fully understood what it was that I did, his realisation that I was often lecturing to doctors seemed to satisfy him that I had finally made good). Early on, I encountered my own version of a 'Road to Damascus' experience when I read Jay Haley's shatteringly original book, *Strategies of Psychotherapy* (Haley, 1963), which introduced me to the work of Milton Erickson, and then, a few years later, *Uncommon Therapy: The Psychiatric Techniques of Milton H. Erickson* (Haley, 1973), which presented Erickson's approach in a framework of the family life cycle. Symptoms were seen as developing as families met life transition points, either normal or unexpected, that could not somehow be successfully negotiated. A tension developed between the imperatives of the previous stage and those implied or demanded by the changed circumstances. Family life was described as one endless succession of transition points that demanded that relationships, and our sense of our place in those relationships, be constantly negotiated and renegotiated.

My second 'Road to Damascus' experience was rediscovering the works of Charles Darwin, the monumental implications of which have taken on a greater and greater relevance as we have gained an increasing understanding of the genetic underpinnings of evolution and, more specifically, the more recent evolutionary history of our species.

I want briefly to consider the impact on individual

families, and on the family generally, of the rapid social, scientific and technological changes we are currently experiencing, and also to consider us in the broader context of the continuing process of evolution. It is important to remember that natural selection cannot plan ahead. All current forms of life from the most simple up to the most highly evolved (however we define that), including us, are the results of successful adaptations to *earlier* ecological conditions. In this paper, it clearly will only be possible to touch on a few aspects of this complex topic.

In many circles, science has been given a bad name. It is seen as having failed; or is presented as a dominant knowledge with little more claim to absolute truth than the many other equally valid knowledges that have been subjugated by it. It is seen as reflecting discourses that are predominantly both Western and male (and for both, read BAD). I believe this to be dangerous thinking. Science, a thirst for a better understanding of us and of our environment, has become a desperately important activity. Of course, scientific discoveries can be used in biased, unwise and destructive ways and can lead to arrogant tunnel vision. Clearly, underlying agendas and the interpretation and usage of data will be affected by social/cultural/political factors (for example, a recent *New Scientist* article (Hecht, 1996) has highlighted how governments can force science to give them the answers their prevailing dogmas need to hear, and how scientists are made to 'cooperate'). But this is so with *any* forms of belief or knowledge and the myths and metaphors that support them. Ultimately, however, as Richard Dawkins comments, 'Scientific beliefs are supported by evidence and they get results. Myths and faiths are not and do not' (1995: 33). Yet, the latter are often more capable of engendering strong emotions and creating reference groups with whom (or against whom) we can identify ourselves. Present yourself as against 'expertise' and on the side of 'subjugated knowledges' in a family therapy conference at present and you stand a chance of engendering a high level of the 'feel-good' zeal of a revivalist religious meeting (sometimes, complete with singing and with attendant risks to those revealing themselves as 'non-believers'). As the novelist Thomas Keneally points out in *Schindler's Ark*, 'The thing about a myth isn't whether it is true or not, nor whether it should be true, but that it is somehow truer than truth itself.'

This century is probably the most complex in the whole history of the human race. Complex in terms of the immense scale and scope of the changes that have occurred; in terms of our increasingly fluid understanding of the world and of our place in it; our ability technologically to manipulate more and more aspects of the world; the shrinking of the world through more and faster means of travel; the rapidly increasing sophistication of communication technology; and the increasing definition and circumscription of our lives and our experiences by the imperatives of, and the imperatives transmitted through, the media and the propaganda

machineries of vast commercial interests who are laws only unto themselves.

We have become what Marshall McLuhan has called 'a global village'. Events in one part of the world (or, at least, a biased and edited slant on those events) are broadcast to all other parts in an instant. In most of humanity's past, and even in the earlier part of this century, most people's worlds, and thus their sense of their place in those worlds, were defined in local networks of relatively constant relations between family members and between families and between villages and towns a short distance apart. The rest of the world was something you learned about (or not) through reports of distant happenings, reports that took days, weeks or even months to arrive and to be summarised and/or distorted in gossip or in news-sheets, newspapers or books.

In contrast, to take just one aspect of the last decade, the change from the relatively expensive personal computer, slow and with only a few kilobytes of memory, to the relatively cheap, throw-away priced computers of high speed with gigabytes of memory and giving access to a world wide web of information and potentials bewildering in their scope, has been breathtaking.

Against this backdrop of rapid development we are also increasingly made instantly aware, through the same processes of information distribution, of the extent of murder, rape, domestic violence, child-abuse, torture and execution, riots, vandalism, bombings (smart or otherwise), wars between religious or political factions, between nations and states, and a myriad other atrocities; of the effects of pollution and of environmental degradation; of the continuing gap between the rich and the poor; of the rigidity and duplicity of most of our leaders; the volatility and callous indifference of 'market forces'; of the possibilities, now looking more like probabilities, of the effects of global warming and the collapse of the ozone layer. The list goes on. I am sure you are all acutely aware of many of the issues.

How do we find a way of making sense of ourselves and of our *families-through-time-into-the-future* with such a rapid succession of endless transitions of such potentially far reaching and perhaps dire pragmatic consequences?

It is likely that significant aspects of our behaviour, particularly the ways we relate to each other in families, between families, and between groupings of families, will be influenced by genetic blueprints that created emotional and behavioural response patterns, and gave us talents, that allowed us successfully to compete with other hominids, and to occupy the niche left by their eventual demise many thousands of years ago.

In all of the animal kingdom, all behaviours, all social structures, appear ultimately to revolve, either directly or indirectly, around the seemingly irrepressible imperative to reproduce. As far as evolution is concerned, all else is just commentary, inessential frills. The history of evolution is basically the history of those species which more effectively reproduced the best adaptations of themselves such that their offspring competed more effectively for the wherewithal that ensured their off-

spring competed more effectively for the wherewithal that ensured their offspring ... and so on. All adaptations and their associated behaviours, any emotions that prompt them, and all social organisations, will ultimately be tested on the harsh rack of the survival (reproductive success) of the fittest (most suited to the *current* conditions, which does not *necessarily* mean just the strongest or most aggressive).

According to evolutionary psychologists, natural selection appears to have ensured the continuation of *our* species by favouring healthy, 'successful' males who invested considerably in providing security for offspring born to a female (or, in some cultures, a number of females) who appeared to them to be faithful and to whom they presented themselves as having resources and being dependable, whilst also taking occasional opportunities to impregnate other young females, where possible without taking any further responsibility (i.e. further investment costs) or disrupting their primary relationship(s). In every culture there was probably a variety of ways in which males were compared, or competed with each other, to achieve high ranking, just as there are today.

Natural selection appears generally to have favoured females in our species who tended to be selective and apparently 'coy', giving the impression of being potentially faithful, such that a male with resources would be encouraged seriously to invest in them, thus providing security for their offspring. In a competitive environment, it makes no genetic sense for a male to invest in protecting another male's child (although it is a male's lot never to be 100% sure of his paternity of a child). At the same time, these females may well have sought covert liaisons with more 'desirable' (i.e. genetically desirable) but philandering males by whom they could become pregnant with healthy offspring that would subsequently be provided for and protected by the more dependable, yet duped, male. In every culture, females would have had a variety of ways to compete with rivals to attract the attentions of the highest ranked male available, either as provider, impregnator, or both.

In a survey of thirty-seven cultures, David Buss (1989) found that, in all of them, men preferred younger, attractive mates and women preferred older men with goods, property or money. Any discussion of male/female relationships can give rise to much passion with the notion of 'patriarchy' a prominent subject. However, as Bintliff (1995) has asked,

What if our propensity to dominate each other, particularly males to females, is deeply-rooted in the very origins of the human species? Running away from this disturbing possibility ... seems to me to risk losing our ability to own up to our problematic social nature ... to face up to the worst, potential implications of our primate origins, so that through that awareness we could direct our cultural skills at counteracting the negative inheritance of that descent. Have we lost the courage to confront that challenge today?

On the issue of power in male/female relationships and comparing us with our closest relative, the chimpanzee, anthropologist Helen Fisher points out,

From the perpetual power struggles at the Arnhem Zoo, primatologist Franz De Waal established several things about power among these apes, principles that probably applied to our ancestors on the grasslands of Africa millennia ago and that have been carried across time to modern humankind.

First of all, power shifts. Ranks are formalised, but animals are part of a pliable network of relationships. Moreover, the ability to rule does not depend on size, speed, agility, or aggressiveness; it depends on wits, on whom you know, and how you pay your social debts. Last, power can be either formal or informal. As supporters and arbiters, females are major players in the power game; under the right set of circumstances even a female can reign.

In fact, when visitors asked De Waal which were more powerful, male or female chimps, he shrugged and explained it thus. If you look at who greets whom, males dominate females 100 percent of the time. If you count who wins aggressive interactions, males win 80 percent of the time. But if you measure who takes food away from whom or who sits in the best spots, females win 80 percent of the time ...

De Waal confirmed the two things that anthropologists have observed in human cultures: status is not a single, monolithic quality measured in a single way; and male dominance, if it implies power over females in every sphere of life, is a myth (1992: 223–224).

For example, although the advantages of infidelity for males seem obvious, Baker and Bellis (1990) pointed out that an apparently universal feature of monogamous species is that from time to time *both* sexes engage in what they call ‘extra-pair copulation’ (EPC). Many birds who live in colonies apparently mate monogamously, yet DNA testing shows that over a third of the baby birds appear to be the result of EPCs in which it appears the females take an active part (rather than being the seduced ‘victims’ of aggressive, philandering males). They hypothesised that, for females, the advantages of EPC could be to secure the best genetic inheritance for their offspring by promoting sperm competition, the benefits of which would be maximised by copulating with extra partners around times of peak fertility. Looking at humans, the results of a questionnaire that was responded to by 2708 women who claimed to have a current main male sexual partner, demonstrated that they were more likely to be unfaithful during their most fertile period whether or not they were using contraception although, as a whole, during EPCs they were less likely to use contraception. Over the whole menstrual cycle, 24.7% of EPCs were ‘unprotected’ compared to only 15.4% of copulations with regular partners, whilst, during the most fertile period, the equivalent figures were 26% compared to 14%. They go on to say,

Our study thus predicts a level of paternal discrepancy (i.e. offspring sired by males other than their putative fathers) of between 6.9 and 13.8%. Blood group studies in Britain indicate levels of paternal discrepancy of from 5.7% ... to 20–30% ... There is no indication here that the level of EPC reported in our nationwide study is either unrepresentative or high ... We suggest our data are more consistent with a female-driven phenomenon (Baker & Bellis, 1990: 998).

Interestingly, in some recent research by Astrid Jutte, four groups of men were exposed to inhalations which, in three of the groups, were of synthetically produced copulins mimicking vaginal secretions at three different stages of the menstrual cycle (ovulation, menstruation and a third stage in the cycle); in the fourth group only water vapour was used. In those men exposed to the scent of ovulation, testosterone levels (measured in their saliva) increased by half. The scents of the other two stages led to minimal increases and the water vapour to a decrease. Although men may appear unaware that a woman is ovulating, they seem apparently to respond physiologically through the production of a hormone likely to ‘turn them on’ (Motluk, 1996). Although Jutte was not prepared to say that this *proves* that ovulation directly affects men’s attraction towards women in the way that it influences our primate relatives, it would be strange if there were absolutely no connection.

Healthy and ‘attractive’ females tended to attract higher status males: lower ranking males would be left generally to choose from lower ranking females, and presumably, vice versa. Interestingly, it appears, at least in birds, that the more ‘attractive’ males tend to be inattentive fathers. As Matt Ridley comments (about birds, let’s be clear):

When a female mates with an attractive male, he works less hard and she works harder at bringing up the young ... This, of course increases her incentive to find a mediocre but hardworking husband and cuckold him by having an affair with a superstud next door (Ridley, 1993: 224).

If it is the case that a significant number of females in any otherwise monogamous species are choosing to mate, whether ‘legitimately’ or through ‘extra pair copulation’, with males having what are seen as traits more desirable than the average, then, over time, those traits should surely increasingly predominate in the population. The research of Malte Andersson (1982) with widow birds demonstrated how females would select males with long tails even though long tails actually make the male birds less effective in flight and therefore much more vulnerable to predators. As Dawkins summarises, ‘... he found that males with artificially elongated tails attracted four times as many females as males with artificially shortened tails. Those with tails of normal, natural length had intermediate success’ (1988: 214). It is interesting to speculate about which physical, behavioural and attitudinal traits in the pre-human male might have been selected out by female preference (and vice versa) over the many thousands of years leading up to the emergence of hunter-gatherer humans. Such traits, if successful then, would still feature significantly now in our genes even though the ‘desirable’ traits more suitable for our highly developed ‘civilised’ societies may be somewhat different.

The intensity of the imperatives to reproduce leads to an intensity of emotions surrounding courtship. The outcomes of these emotions can range from the beauty of Shakespeare’s sonnets to the murderous rage of a man who learns of or suspects infidelity. Although there

would have been a variety of ways in which any human culture would have ordered relationships, the underpinnings of these patterns would have been genetically selected over many thousands of years and have acted (and, I would argue, still act) as a basic sub-text. In the relatively small hunter-gatherer societies in which early Homo Sapiens lived, these patterns obviously worked in a contained way, probably with occasional violent outbursts, either between competing males or towards females suspected of, or exposed as, unfaithful and the suspected offspring of that liaison.

The belief that human behaviour is instinctual is often attacked by those who believe it largely to be learned. To argue, for example, an instinctual basis for aggressive behaviours is to risk being accused of attempting to justify or to excuse violence. Seeking an explanation outside of the dictates of what is currently 'politically correct' (i.e. how certain people would *like* the world to be) is seen by some as synonymous with condoning that violence. Surely, at the most basic level, what is innate is the instinct to survive and to perpetuate the species (otherwise we wouldn't be here). Aggressive behaviours, as with submissive behaviours, flight, etc., are a part of a varied repertoire of responses to the range of situations faced by any creature as it follows the dictates of these basic instincts. As Jane Goodall comments,

Animals are aggressive not because they are savage, or bestial, or evil, ... but because such behaviour provides food and defence against predators, because it spaces out the population and avoids overcrowding, because it has adaptive value. Aggression is a survival strategy, evolved to serve life. It coexists, especially in the primates, with compassion, altruism, heroism, and tender, self-sacrificing love for the young (1988:199-200).

The total ecological context within which, in any species, survival and the urge to reproduce is embedded will surely determine the range of behaviours that become an essential part of the process and the extent to which they become so, including aggressive behaviours and the emotions by which they are triggered.

In Western cultures and increasingly in other cultures, we and our children are unrelentingly subjected to media and business manipulations and exploitations of fads and fashions driven largely by the intensity of feelings, the sexual awareness, the fears and doubts, hopes and dreams of the young. We are faced with limitless portrayals of and gossip about idealised and unachievable male and female supermodels and superstars who represent simplistic stereotypes living often in unattainable luxury and enjoying seemingly unlimited choices of sexual partners (with whom, according to the popular press, they have 'sizzling, hot, steamy, raunchy, etc.' relationships). With such images against which to compare themselves, is it any surprise that feelings of inadequacy may be, for example, leading boys and increasing numbers of girls towards violent and self-destructive behaviours, and girls and increasing numbers of boys towards eating disorders and other obsessive concerns with self and body image. As the astronomer Carl Sagan comments,

An extraterrestrial being, newly arrived on earth—scrutinising what we mainly present to our children on television and radio and in movies, newspapers, magazines, comics and many books—might easily conclude that we are intent on teaching them murder, rape, cruelty, superstition and consumerism. We keep at it, and through constant repetition many of them finally get it. What kind of society could we create if, instead, we drummed into them science and a sense of hope (1996:42).

In my more depressed moments, I fear for my children's future, sometimes quite acutely. I do not wonder at the increasing incidence of youth suicide, only at how it is still so relatively limited a phenomenon. I believe that adults are no less affected and, in a world increasingly defined by a cult of youth, old age has suffered an almost total reversal of status. This was particularly brought home to me in a conversation with Samoan family therapist Kiwi Tamasese, when I heard about the way elders are respected in her culture.

Humans have demonstrated an incredible degree of emergent flexibility, creativity and the capacity to adapt (in the non-evolutionary sense) to extremely diverse and rapidly changing circumstances. However, in his book *The Moral Animal*, Robert Wright, the evolutionary psychologist opines,

What the theory of natural selection says ... is that people's minds were designed to maximise fitness in the environment in which those minds evolved ... Only traits that would have propelled the genes responsible for them through the generations in our ancestral social environment should, in theory, be part of human nature today... We aren't designed to stand on crowded subway platforms, or to live in suburbs next door to people we never talk to, or to get hired or fired, or to watch the evening news. This disjunction between the contexts of our design and of our lives is probably responsible for much psychopathology, as well as much suffering of a much less dramatic sort (Wright, 1995: 38-39).

It's no surprise that modern feminism gathered such momentum during the 1960s, after post-World War II suburbanisation (and so much else) had diluted the sense of neighbourhood community and pulled the extended family apart; women weren't designed to be suburban housewives (Wright, 1995:138).

In the smaller social units in which our basic 'blueprints' evolved, there were no doubt checks and balances to deal with the inevitable tensions in the crucial area (crucial in both the physical and the psychological sense) of mate selection. What are the effects of transposing this 'blueprint' into today's 'global village', particularly with the communication industry's blurring of the real and the unreal in its portrayal and exploitation of sexual imagery. Just looking at male behaviour, the geneticist Steve Jones has commented,

... men, particularly young men, are dangerous. They are both victims and perpetrators. More probably than not, their behaviour has evolved. In animals (at least in those, like humans, in which variation in sexual success among males is greater than that among females) males are at their most ferocious when they are young and searching for a mate. Even the most determined to deny that biology

affects human behaviour find it hard to deny this simple fact (Jones, 1996: 212).

However, he goes on to point out that the degree of violence varies markedly from society to society:

The city of Detroit is forty times more violent than its English equivalent; indeed, a twenty-five year-old Detroit woman is considerably more dangerous than a London man of the same age. Even an enthusiast for biological explanations could scarcely argue that this lies in the genes, rather than in the societies, of the two cities (Jones, 1996: 213).

Novelist David Eddings has one of his characters describe the residents in a deprived area of an American city as follows,

They are at the bottom. They've missed out on all the goodies of life. The goodies are all around, but they can't have them. They live in filth and squalor and continual noise. Their normal conversational tone is a scream—they shriek for emphasis. Their cars are all junkers that break down if you even look at them. Their TV sets don't work, and they steal from each other as a matter of habit. Their kids all have juvenile records and are failing in school. They live in continual frustration and on the borderline of rage all the time. A chance remark can trigger homicidal fury (1993: 123).

It is thus important when considering the effects of our genetic heritage not to ignore the effects of many of our social structures and the gross inequalities and many other social ills of the world. Writing about the incidence of mental health problems in the city of Bristol, England, Heather Mills points out,

Although mental illness crosses social boundaries, there is a wealth of evidence—all too obvious in Bristol's inner city—of links between poverty, deprivation and unemployment and psychiatric morbidity ... And it has a large black population which, for reasons so far unexplained, suffers high levels of schizophrenia. Suspicion points at cultural and environmental influence—the higher rates are not mirrored in the Caribbean ... (1996: 23).

As Wright comments:

People weren't, of course, designed to be relentlessly happy in the ancestral environment; as here, anxiety was a chronic motivator, and happiness was the always pursued, often receding, goal. Still, people *were* designed not to go crazy in the ancestral environment (1995: 139).

We live in a time when economic rationalism and the multi-nationals are stripping millions of their dignity and their future (after years of 'Thatcherism', according to various reports in the *Guardian Weekly*, it has been estimated that over two thirds of Britain's workers no longer have any security of employment, about 250,000 young people were homeless at some stage last year, and the prison population is growing such that a new prison is needed every three weeks; and the Australian government is currently pursuing many similar policies).

However, it is also important not to ignore the influence of our genetic heritage when considering these social structures and inequalities. Wright (1995) has sug-

gested that we need to show a greater concern for male inequality than for female inequality. This sounds like the height of political incorrectness. However, as he points out, males are genetically programmed to be acutely aware of status and competition for very sound evolutionary reasons, and male inequality often leads to violence, harmful to both females and males (and, in our species, all too frequently to rape and murder).

Wright is not making a statement either about how things ought to be in male/female relationships, or saying that we are trapped into an inevitable cycle, nor is he excusing male violence, or inequalities between the sexes. We are not inexorably controlled by our genetic inheritance, we have choices. Even in the animal kingdom, at least amongst the primates, innate does not mean inevitable. As Sagan and Druyan have pointed out, when chimps are in the enclosed confines of zoos,

... males—and especially high-ranking males—exhibit a degree of measured restraint under crowded conditions that would be unthinkable if they were free. Imprisoned chimps are much more likely to share their food. Captivity somehow brings forth a democratic spirit. When jammed together, chimps make an extra effort to get the social machinery humming. In this remarkable transformation it is the females who are the peacemakers ... At the Arnhem colony in the Netherlands ... [when] real fights were about to break out and the males began to arm themselves with rocks, the females gently removed the weapons, prying their fingers open. If the males rearmed themselves, the females disarmed them again (1992: 301–302).

The evolutionary steps that gave us a more complex brain had a side-effect far in excess of what was needed to retain our edge over our primate and hominid competition as well as to adapt to the needs of the terrain we inhabited. It is my opinion that we became 'too clever by half'. With language came the ability to name and to describe, to discuss and to plan, to think in abstract terms and to create abstract 'realities'. With symbolic language, we were no longer limited to sensory-based observations and descriptions. We became able to enter a world of 'why?', 'how?', and 'what does it all mean?'; to construct and to impose complex belief frameworks and to make attributions and interpretations derived from those frameworks. Though our fellow primates, like most social species, have ways of differentiating between those who are members of a group and those who are outsiders, only with symbolic language can group membership be defined by a practically limitless myriad of real, imagined or invented criteria highlighting aspects of family, tribe, race, gender, colour, religious belief, political affiliation, class, sexual preference, whether eggs should be eaten sharp end up or sharp end down (see Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*). Groups of chimpanzees will defend their territory against other groups of chimpanzees and will often attack their neighbours, sometimes, as observed by Jane Goodall, to the point of wiping them out. They clearly have a rudimentary (compared to us) form of xenophobia, but ultimately based, as far as we can ascertain, in the basic need to compete for food and space, and

to ensure that *their* genes rather than those of *others* are handed on.

Humans have the ability to invent beliefs that justify a whole range of positions and also to take the high moral ground in respect of those beliefs. It is this ability to think in abstract terms through which we humans have been able to reach for the stars, metaphorically and creatively in the arts and sciences as well as literally through space exploration, in ways that our close primate relatives clearly never could. However, these human achievements stand in stark contrast to our ability to sink to the lowest, most destructive and obscene depths to which those same relatives have never stooped, in the belief that we have right, might, God or Gods on our side. Back in those early times, was it a Cro-Magnon or was it a rival Neanderthal that was the first creature on Earth to die *for an idea*, for an abstraction that defined a *them-and-us* framework in respect of which the one who died was seen as a *them*?

Another aspect of our developed brain appears to be the postulation of a spiritual dimension. As the novelist Jim Harrison (1986:2) observes, 'the deepest feeling of all is that there should be more'. For many, it seems important to believe that there is something special about us that separates us *definitively* from the rest of the animal kingdom, that we have an immortal soul, that we are 'Lords of Creation'. As Fagan says,

Consciousness, cognition, self-awareness, foresight, and the ability to express oneself and one's emotions: these are direct consequences of fluent speech. They can be linked with another attribute of the fully fledged human psyche: the capacity for symbolic and spiritual thought, concerned not only with subsistence and technology, but with defining the boundaries of existence, and the relationship between the individual, the group and the universe. In all societies, such themes find expression in art and in religion (1990:12).

It is my opinion that the deep sense we humans have of the existence of a spiritual dimension is proof ultimately of nothing other than that one consequence of our larger brain is that we have a deep sense of (or thirst for) a spiritual dimension. It is proof of a phenomenon of the questioning brain and nothing else. Clearly, there are many who will disagree with me and, ultimately, there is no proof of either position. Yet this sense that there 'must be something more', although it has inspired many, and sometimes great, achievements, has also led to much horror.

Only humans will burn fellow humans at the stake, or even wipe out whole populations, for having a slightly different answer to important questions such as, 'how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?'; only humans would rape and 'ethnically cleanse' erstwhile good neighbours in the name of an epic historical struggle; only humans, faced with the horrendous spectre of over-population, would hold to a belief in a 'divine' disapproval of artificial birth control; only humans would justify, either scientifically or philosophically, or would invoke divine approval for, methodical subjugations, often including mutilation, torture and death,

based on class, race, gender or any one of a myriad real or artificial distinctions.

As Dixon observes,

It is a feature of strongly held dogmas that they steadfastly resist not only unpalatable truths but even the faintest suggestion of the barest possibility of the most tangential reference to an unacceptable fact. Better that men should die and cities be overrun than that the sacred teachings should be found wanting (1979:136).

With our skills at abstract reasoning, anything, however bizarre, can be proved to be a good or an evil, a divine or political proscription or prescription. Inquisitions, reformations, revolutions, colonisation, communism, capitalism, economic rationalism, the 'New World Order'—the list of justifications for the unjustifiable is endless; and all will often condone and even promote oppression, rape, pillage, and murder, privilege in the face of extreme deprivation, starvation in the face of plenty, mass extinction and genocide be it by the spread of smallpox, or in death camps, or by the surgically 'clean' use of smart bombs and guided missiles. In the face of increasing unemployment, world economic and industrial stagnation, and potential environmental suicide, only humans will cling to sacred though unproven political tenets such as, for example, those of monetarism and the supposed wisdom of 'the market place' (which must never be questioned). Again, as Dixon comments,

... an inability to admit one has been in the wrong will be the greater the more wrong one has been, and the more wrong one has been the more bizarre will be the subsequent attempts to justify the unjustifiable (1979:166).

As the world's population continues to expand and resources become increasingly scarce, we are likely to experience an intensification of this tendency. It is becoming vital that we better understand our place in evolution. What are the biological imperatives that influence us, often in common with much of the animal kingdom, imperatives that clearly were effective in establishing Homo Sapiens as a successful species thousands of years ago, probably in the grasslands of Africa? We need to understand as far and as quickly as we are able, the pragmatic implications of the relationship between those biological traits and tendencies and the rapid and massive changes we have made over the last few thousand years but particularly those we are experiencing during the latter part of this century.

Unlike almost any other animal, we have a unique ability to make choices about how we are going to be, to adapt the varied expressions of our instinctual legacy and to confront certain of its manifestations. We can choose to pursue ethical and moral goals; we can make choices about social structure, about sexual politics, about human relationships from the couple and family level up to the level of international politics; we can choose a path that values equality and cooperation and the dignity and rights of all human beings.

It is not for us to know how natural selection is operating on us nor what will be the next successful

branching-off (assuming we do not become yet another species that rapidly becomes extinct, albeit a somewhat destructive one). There is increasing evidence that the chemicals we have been pumping into the environment are producing mutations and dramatically lowering fertility rates in many species including our own (Colborn, et al., 1996). So, maybe those with a greater tolerance to the effects of these chemicals or who have begun to mutate in an as yet unknown way are already being selected out and are handing on that trait to their offspring.

I think we are at a most crucial stage in our species' history. We must work hard to understand the implications of the broader transitions our species is dealing with at the technological, the social and the evolutionary level, at the same time as we help individual families and family members, at the more immediate level, to deal with the transitions that affect them in their day-to-day lives.

Social standing among the lower primates is determined largely by factors such as physical strength and hormone levels. Human hierarchies, however, depend more on intelligence and upbringing—or so we are inclined to believe. Yet a lack of foresight in the past is beginning to choke our civilisation ... Those in the human world who dominate are often not the kindest, wisest, or most sensible. Rather, their traits of initiative and taste for control coincide with an enthusiasm for power and profit.

(Malo, 1993: 45).

... if we are ever to control human violence we must first appreciate that humans have a natural, biological tendency to react violently, as individuals or as groups, in certain situations [my emphasis]. If we could understand the details of this response and its determinants, we might begin to grasp some hope of prevention.

(Konner, 1993: xviii).

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