

Section 13 – Tomorrow and the Day After

Marriage Beyond the Patriarchy

Human pair-bonding can be one of the most satisfying and awe-inspiring experiences available to us. The feelings of love, closeness and complicity, strengthened by sexual desire and reward, combine the best of what it is to be human. Together, in the context of the shared adventure of life's journey, these emotions are even more deeply satisfying. In a good pair-bonded relationship, the couple are not only best friends but also lovers, enjoying the most satisfying fruits of both.

These powerful emotions combine to make a level of intimacy between two people possible that is spiritual in intensity and can indeed last for the lifetime of the partners.

Formalised marriage can be a wonderful thing. As long as the rights of both individuals are equal and protected, a commitment made between the partners, enacted in a formal ritual that incorporates symbolism plus intent and is witnessed by their community sends a powerful message. The individuals feel it at a profound level, and the community is more likely to help through difficult times. It is the commitment that matters, and there is no need whatever for a patriarchal version of that ritual. The pair bond comes first and is always the most important factor; so if the couple, for whatever reason, falls out of love, then the marriage can end so that they may move on without excessive cost or social opprobrium.

The pair-bonding mechanism is much more complex than is often realised. In the first place, there is no need for the parties to be of different sex or even gender. In fact there is as much scope for variety in successful pair-bonding as there is in any other facet of human life. In addition, humans can develop sexualised pair-bonds that are lasting and profound, but not necessarily exclusive; we saw this amongst the Zo'é and it occurs in polyamorous cultures all over the world. Thus it is quite possible for both women and men to have profound, deep pair-bonds with several others at once, of any sex or gender. Over a lifetime this becomes even more complicated.

Same-sex, same gender and multiple, concurrent sexualised bonding models are all completely viable and all, as seen where they continue to exist, provide for the birth and raising of children, and the successful management of society. In many cultures such models have endured for hundreds or even thousands of years and are probably as old as humanity.

Even marriages that are arranged for the benefit of both parties may be successful, as long as the rights and freedoms of both parties are equal and both are willing to accept the arrangement without coercion or cultural pressure.

By usurping something so fundamentally human, so profoundly beautiful and so powerful, the patriarchy has, for millennia, used the human pair bond to enforce its control over society. It has prescribed not only with whom we are allowed to fall in love, but also how we are permitted to express that love. It has made certain acts of intimacy taboo or illegal – and in some cases, even proscribed such minor expressions of affection as public kissing or holding hands. Essentially, it has done the same to human pair-bonding as it has done to our sense of wonder at the natural world. It has appropriated positive emotions and perverted them to its ends.

Now that we have seen how this came to be, we can change it. We can create new rituals for the expression of voluntary unions between equals; unions which exist out of the mutual love of the parties, and we can move beyond the constraints imposed by the patriarchy over who those parties may be.

This is a significant step. The basis of the patriarchy's power is in its control over reproduction and sexual behaviour, principally of women but also of men. Denying the patriarchy this control and honouring people as individuals free to choose who and how they love may not destroy it, but does go a long way towards clipping its wings. Like the financial and social empowerment of women and their political enfranchisement, the removal of authority over consensual loving relationships undermines the foundation of the patriarchy and may contribute to its eventual, and long overdue, demise.