



## THE MIKI KASHTAN COLUMN

### Surrounding the Patriarchal Field with Love

by Miki Kashtan

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

At a time when the future of humanity is so completely in question, many of us find it exceedingly difficult to hold on to any sense of possibility for humans, let alone a bright vision of realigning humanity with life through restoring flow, togetherness and choice. The gap between any vision we might open to and what we see within and around us is too painful to be with. Being cynical, closing our hearts to ourselves, and denying the cellular memory we all carry of the trust with which we first came here, are all versions of what some of us are doing to try to make the vision go away, as are numbness or addictive substances or behaviours. Some of us, instead, persist with holding on to the vision, and manage the mourning we would feel if we were to hold both the vision and the gap by attempting to force what we see within or around us to conform to the vision. The urgency that many feel; the sense of fighting against something without having a clear sense of an alternative; the anger, shaming and blaming that are so often intertwined with work for social change; and even ‘cancel culture’ itself, are another way that we desperately try to bridge the unbridgeable.

Neither of these pathways ultimately works. Whatever our particular version of managing rather than being with the gap, they don’t lead to any tangible transformation. Sometimes we

numb ourselves sufficiently to be able to tolerate a vision-less existence, buckling up in the dull and comfortable survival mode that is so frequent in much of the global north. Sometimes, those of us who engage in movements for change manage to make some small gains – legislative, cultural or economic. Yet without shifting the underlying deeper logic of the system within which we live, the one resting on scarcity, separation and powerlessness, such gains remain short lived. Using methods for creating change that reinforce that which we are aiming to change will not bring us to the vision. History is overflowing with painful examples of revolutionaries re-creating structures that mimic the ones they aimed to dismantle.

Even when we embark on a personal journey of healing, we still usually keep it at an individual level, without any pathway from there to systemic change except for the dream of a critical mass. At the same time, attempting to create systemic change hasn’t gone very far, either. As I look at the last few centuries, even decades, I don’t see evidence of shrinking the gap. The global systems of extraction and oppression have widened and deepened their reach. Our collective efforts to change them have been slipping.

What, then, can we do instead?

Since the late 1980s, my own draw was to what I now know to call *aligning means with ends*. As Stephanie van Hook from the Metta Center for Nonviolence Education says, we all know that planting tomato seeds and expecting to harvest corn won't happen. And yet when it comes to creating change, we get lost. More often than not, even the small gains that are made here and there aren't reflected in how activist groups function. Visionary communities are rife with conflict and challenges. Patriarchal methods and frameworks are rampant everywhere we look. So many of us who are working for change, both individually and collectively, continue to motivate ourselves and each other through 'should' energy, to overstretch beyond capacity, and to use us/them ways of explaining things. We regularly re-create patterns of dominance and submission, even as we call attention to them and aim to transform them in the larger structures. We oppose and fight against, without having clear visions of alternatives. Using patriarchal methods, no matter how urgent anything seems, won't transform the patriarchal field itself. For that, something else is needed. For me, that alternative is nothing short of creating a field of love large enough to surround the patriarchal field.

That field of love is ours biologically, as Humberto Maturana and Gerda Werden-Zöller document in their book *The Origins of Humanness in the Biology of Love*.<sup>1</sup> Our species evolved in a lineage of love that has specific biological features.<sup>2</sup> That field of love remains ours spiritually, pointed to and evoked in all spiritual traditions. We have almost lost it, and yet it's ours to lean on and rebuild. That we live in patriarchal societies, as I see it, is not something inherent about who we are, Hobbes and the social Darwinists notwithstanding. Rather, I see the patriarchal turn into scarcity, separation and powerlessness as a series of *events*, whether calamities or invasions, that overwhelmed the human love field and tipped us into collective trauma. I continue to maintain we all know this love field within us, somewhere, however traumatised we are.

Restoring the love field means increasing our capacity beyond our patriarchal conditioning.

The task is immense beyond measure, and is growing in its magnitude. As the patriarchal field has been growing its destructive capacities through the powers unleashed by capitalism, the impacts on us have increased. We have faced cumulative multi-generational and increasing trauma. We have been, and continue to be, torn away from community and from land, from meaning and from trust, from connection and from freedom. We have been subjected to stories about who we are and what life is which paint us to ourselves and each other as *homo economicus*: solely interested in maximising our own material benefit, even at cost to others. Through all that has transpired – economically, politically and socially – in the last several thousand years and especially in the last couple of hundred years, we have lost so much that many of us no longer see the material possibility of a liveable future, even if we can envision one.

We are a low-capacity species. We are low in our capacity to love, to collaborate for solutions that work for all, to give and receive in flow, to maintain togetherness in the face of challenges, and to respond with conscious choice in adverse circumstances.

If we are to increase our capacity sufficiently to transform the patriarchal field itself, beyond rearranging the chairs or making some things slightly more bearable individually or collectively, we can only start with bringing love, first, to the truth of where we are, at whatever scale we operate. This includes the very difficult task of shifting how we relate to limitations: our own, others', and those of groups of which we're a part. Limitations are what keeps us from functioning, now, in the way we want the world to be. Some of them are given and cannot be changed based on our biology. The majority of our limitations are, themselves, where patriarchy impacted us, through internalisation, to the point of having patterns, beliefs, trauma, ways of reacting and much else that constrict us from being able to flow with life, maintain and restore togetherness, and have sufficient resilience for ongoing conscious choice. This applies both individually and within groups and movements.

Knowing our limitations isn't quite enough if we hold them through the lens of judgement. I aim, instead, to hold them as pure information, precise data that reveal to me, to us, what is in the internal part of the gap between the now and the vision. It can be wrenchingly painful to do so while simultaneously deeply relaxing, as it brings the inner war to an end. Because our limitations are, primarily, how the patriarchal field shows up within us, looking at limitations as information requires exactly the same kind of love that is needed for transforming the patriarchal field as a whole.

Then we can begin the deep and complex task of seeing what needs healing, what we can build agreements around to keep us from falling into the limitation, where we can grow capacity by learning skills, and where we simply need to accept that it's not ours to do something. The rest of this article consists of three examples of how to engage lovingly with limitations to increase our capacity. Each of these demonstrates a different pathway. The first two are anonymous, with details changed to support that anonymity. The last one is about me, with full details.

### **Transformation: Attending to a Pattern of Separation**

I will call the person whose pattern this is, 'Jennifer'. The pattern in question, when activated, tends to spiral into catastrophic thinking, intense reaction to others, especially people close to her, and inability to find pathways out of the situation, which tends to then escalate to active conflict with others. Jennifer decided to document everything she knows about the pattern, to build a vision for herself about how she sees herself when free from this pattern, and to make detailed agreements with herself and others that are specific enough that she can keep them even under the stress of the pattern.

Just the full documentation of what happens when the pattern is active was a significant gift to the people around her. Here's just one example of what that looked like: 'It is a well-grooved pattern and is very easy for me to go to, especially once it has been activated and fed a

little, and it can take a lot of energy to bring me back to choice.'

The real game changer was recognising that it simply wasn't within her capacity to shift this pattern, and choosing, instead, to mobilise others in support of choice. For example, Jennifer gave one person she particularly trusts *carte blanche* to tell her what to do once the pattern is active. As another example, she invited everyone else to remind her in the moment of specific practices that support her to regain choice through vulnerability. In addition, Jennifer took on a host of specific practices for her to do that support her in regaining choice, and recorded them in a document anyone around her could remind her to activate. The main obstacle to doing all this was shame about having the pattern. As soon as she was able to look at the pattern with tenderness, everything else fell into place quite quickly.

Jennifer's pattern has considerably weakened its grip on her over time.

### **Release: When Conversations about Power Cannot Happen**

A few years ago, I worked with an intentional community in the US on a project that included aligning their decision-making system with their purpose and values. The community was struggling with a common pattern that happens in many communities: unacknowledged differences in decision-making power that were limiting the experience of joy in collaboration that is foundational to this community's dreams. In aiming to support them, I opened up a conversation about the topic, soon to discover that each thing that anyone said was tied to long-standing conflicts and pervasive mistrust. Nothing about the situation itself could be acknowledged in a way that all could align with.

In the end, after listening to several people speak *within* the divergence rather than *about* the divergence, I offered them a framing of their limitation that settled them immediately. I suggested that the conditions for having such conversations fruitfully were not in place. Regardless of their position about any of the topics within the charged area, everyone could see that it was simply true that they lacked the

capacity to have the conversation. It allowed them an elegant exit from the trap of saying just one more thing that would, in the speaker's unthought-through view, bring others to see what they are seeing. This revelation also made it immediately clear that they didn't have the capacity, at that time, to rethink their decision-making structures and processes. All they could do if they wanted to maintain togetherness within the community was to make minimal changes in the decision-making system and to put resources into building capacity in the area of having conversations about power so that, over time, they would be able to hold what is important to everyone in designing a new system for making decisions. Although everyone wished for more to be possible, everyone accepted the truth when presented without judgement.

### **Compensation: Engaging with Limitations about Receiving Feedback**

The Vision Mobilisation framework,<sup>3</sup> the approach that informs all the work documented in this article, is a tool of radical love. When we identify limitations, with full tenderness, we choose whether we aim to transform them or to compensate for them. This option of compensating for limitations is, in itself, a radical departure from a common pattern of self-improvement that many people within some societies subscribe to without clear awareness of how deeply it is rooted within patriarchal conditioning, including shame about who we are. I see choosing to own a limitation and find ways around it, rather than always through it, as a way of proclaiming freedom and self-love: I am this person who has this limitation. I accept me with that. I trust others sufficiently to accept ways of functioning, with their support, that allow all of us to increase our collective capacity to shift the patriarchal field, in however minute ways.

Affectionately, we call the section of the work that is about giving others information about how to engage with us an 'instruction manual'. My own vision mobilisation structure is publicly available on my website and is, in fact, the 'about' section of it.<sup>4</sup> From there, a link to my Instruction Manual is available.<sup>5</sup>

Here's how I own one of my significant current limitations in the area of receiving feedback:

My capacity to receive and integrate feedback, overall, used to be very large, and it's taken a big hit in the last few years. During this time I have absorbed *huge* impacts on me, often through people offering feedback in ways that fully exceeded my capacity.... (p. 7)

I then continue to give people detailed instructions about how they can give me feedback and who to turn to if they can't follow those instructions. This is care both for my limitations and those of others, as I still give them a way to engage with me productively when they have feedback for me.

### **Growing the Love**

The dream of a world that works for all life won't go away. Any of us who hold on to it are the recipients of a long chain of people, across time and space, who have passed on the burning conviction that, as the World Social Forum people say, 'another world is possible'. When we can bring love, tenderness and radical acceptance to our limitations, individually and collectively, we can, as a clear next step the details of which I'll keep for another article, bring the same to others' limitations. It starts with remembering that everyone was born an infant needing material and emotional active, around-the-clock care to make it past the first months. We can then deepen our own trust and regain the simple knowledge that all of us continue to need love, and that whatever anyone does that isn't aligned with love is the result of internalising patriarchal conditioning. Within our groups, communities and organisations, we can bring love to our own collective limitations, and find pathways to increase our collective capacity.

Beyond this, I don't know how we ever scale love to the magnitude of what we are facing. I don't believe anyone else knows how to scale anything, either, though I long for more companionship in the humility of acknowledging this. All I know to do, think about, and write about, is to move in that direction in practical, tangible steps that are fully within capacity. If we have enough time left, I trust we can untwist the entire human field back into love.

## Notes

- 1 Humberto Maturana and Gerda Werden-Zöller, *The Origins of Humanness in the Biology of Love*, Imprint Academic, Exeter, Devon, 2008.
- 2 The details are well beyond the scope of this short article. I would hope readers of this article will read the book itself, which I consider entirely revolutionary in the boldness of the authors' willingness and capacity to put love right at the biological centre of everything.
- 3 See <https://visionmobilisation.org/>.
- 4 See <http://mikikashtan.org/about>.
- 5 See <https://tinyurl.com/yckww2h2>.

## 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 ([www.NGLcommunity.org](http://www.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.