

THE MIKI KASHTAN COLUMN

Imagining a Post-Patriarchal Theory of Child Development

by Miki Kashtan

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

The seed of this article came to me in 2004, during a therapy session, as I cracked open the final bits of shame I had carried for decades. That shame, just about always, was about love – wanting it, offering it, or trusting it. As my therapist walked me delicately to the edge of what was happening, knowing only that I was extremely uncomfortable making a certain request of her, asking me many small ‘what if?’ questions about the conditions that would make it possible for me to make the request, these words burst out of my mouth: ‘then I wouldn’t want you to ever leave’. I quote from my book *Spinning Threads of Radical Aliveness* about what happened next:

Next, I felt a wave of fury directed at no less than the field of psychology, for having coined the term ‘separation anxiety’. This term implies that separation is the expected goal, and the anxiety is an inevitable part of what life is about. Instead, I knew then, without a shred of doubt, that baby knows best. Baby knows that there is absolutely nothing better than being in close proximity with someone we love. Of course it’s not always humanly possible to give baby this experience. It is, however, entirely and completely possible to let baby know there is nothing wrong with wanting it even when it’s impossible.¹

This was the moment when it fully landed within me that we are unlikely, collectively, to change how we engage with children sufficiently unless we also change the way we think about children and their development.

Collaborating with Children

That it’s indeed possible to affirm babies’ and children’s vulnerable needs comes to me from seeing how my late sister Inbal and her wife raised their son. In their interactions with him, they always affirmed his needs and his beingness, and mourned with him when that was not possible. They made decisions collaboratively with him even before he was verbal, except for a handful of times. They had no rules, no punishment, and no rewards. Theirs was dialogical parenting, in which everyone’s needs matter.²

At the age of three, he valiantly tried, for a whole month, the preschool they carefully selected because they were not expected to leave him there alone if he wasn’t ready for it. Then he said, clearly, that he didn’t want to go back there; that he had tried and it didn’t work; that there were too many children there. Luckily, they had the material capacity to support his learning at home. At 14, he visited several high schools before concluding that none of them offered him what he had at home. He then completed his preparation for university on his own, with their support. He is now pursuing a Ph.D. in chemistry at Stanford University.

Especially in his early years, they encountered a lot of pushback from others. One of those incidents remains etched in me. It was a time when they chose to leave a holiday gathering very early because he was overwhelmed by what was happening, and they didn’t collectively find a strategy that worked for him

to stay. One person present exclaimed something like, ‘You don’t negotiate with a three-year old; you tell them what to do’. This response is quite in line with European first-contact responses to indigenous ways of engaging with children. The gentleness towards and collaboration with children are only two of many differences between our modern, patriarchal, nuclear-family-based ways of engaging with children and those of matriarchal societies.

In an earlier piece, I focused on describing what life looks like in both types of society (as much as this can be done by anyone who isn’t embedded in an indigenous way of living).³ In the present article, I want to imagine what it could mean for children’s lives if we ever manage to reintegrate humanity into the flow of life from where we are now. I am focusing on what pathways children might then learn to follow to care for their needs; where they might learn to find choice; how they might learn to engage with others’ needs when making their own decisions; and how they might learn to orient to giving and receiving. This is about as far as I can see from within our present reality.

When We Can’t Follow Our Preferences

When we are in utero, we receive everything we need without having to ask for it. The entire body that holds the pregnancy is oriented to supplying us when we are in utero. There is no natural, biological substitute for this environment, even though modern science has encroached on that mystery from both ends of the gestation period.

When we are born, we find ourselves in an environment in which we biologically need to take action to attend to our needs. Without suckling, we won’t be able to nourish ourselves. When not in immediate contact with our mother, we also must do something (usually crying) to get her attention to our need. At this time, we also encounter, for the first time, the biological possibility of more than one strategy to attend to a need, since we can receive love,

body warmth, and even milk from others, not only our biological mother.

This uncoupling of needs from the specific strategies that we lean on to attend to them continues to unfold over the course of the coming months and years of our lives, eventually resulting in there often being many strategies that can attend to any of our needs.

In modern, patriarchal socialization, we usually learn about the existence of additional strategies to those that we might prefer through imposition. Initially, we are often moved and placed where it’s most convenient for the adults around us, not necessarily where we want to be, which is generally in close proximity to bodies that are familiar to us. Later, we are told what to do, and even what to want or not want, based on ideas of what is right and what is wrong, without active attention to, and empathic integration of, our experience.

What we learn in this way is to orient to others for guidance on how to act, instead of orienting, initially, to our own flow of preferences and, later, to our growing capacity to negotiate with others’ preferences through understanding all the needs present.

In stark contrast, when our needs are affirmed and when the overall orientation in our surroundings is towards them, as is the case in matriarchal societies, this growing distinction between needs and strategies happens through attunement to when we are ready for it. This develops within us the capacity for flexibility and choice within overall trust in ourselves, in others, and in life. When we can’t follow the simple flow of our preferences, we can turn inward, towards our needs and our care for others’ needs, and find choice there, instead of relying on concepts of what is right and wrong to guide our actions.

Finding Choice within Togetherness

I have previously spoken, both in this journal’s pages⁴ and elsewhere, about the three pillars on which patriarchy rests: scarcity, separation, and

powerlessness. This is the context into which all of us are born, except the extremely few who are still living in matriarchal societies. This is the context in which we must find our way towards having our own sense of choice.

Because we don't have that memory, I have often tried to really imagine what it's like to come here with the biological expectation of our needs being cared for, only to find ourselves in a context where scarcity limits everyone's flow of generosity; where separation is the prevalent way of functioning; and where powerlessness, both individually and systemically, is common. And as if that wasn't enough to crush our spirits, we also find ourselves in contexts where the prevalent theories about who we, the little ones, are, and what we need, are so at odds with our natural and biological flow. This is especially so in modern, global North regions.

Although Freud himself is not a key figure for those who tell parents and others how to be with children, the perspective that he held remains pivotal to it. Nor is his perspective new to Western civilization. What I believe is a first in his work is that he directs a magnifying glass at what happens within us, not around us. His lens is completely tinted by Hobbesian notions, which leaves me entirely unsurprised that he paints a very stark and despairing picture of what he believes is a perpetual struggle, taking place within each of us, between our underlying nature and what is needed for us to function in a civilized state.⁵ Our underlying nature, as Freud sees it, is asocial, entirely self-consumed, and innately prone to aggression. For him, repression isn't a strong enough way to attend to this struggle, which can only be truly resolved through renunciation of the deep wishes associated with the 'pleasure principle' and true acceptance of the 'reality principle', that effectively means that our needs will not, and cannot, be met. This renunciation either happens during the Oedipal phase, or, if we failed that, through therapy. In either case, Freud sees it as rare, leaving most of us to suffer. That our needs cannot be met, for Freud, isn't because of any

social or familial deficiency. Rather, it's because they are inherently insatiable.⁶

This, then, is what infuses the cultural narrative that influences how we are to be treated as children: we must be told what to do, to be controlled, and to be taught to obey. If left to pursue what we want, we will remain selfish and asocial. If actively nurtured, we will become spoiled.

It is only because those who care for us when we are little were, themselves, taught to deny their own feelings and ignore their needs that they have the capacity to hear us cry and suppress the biologically natural urge to be with us. They soothe themselves, in part, by believing that what they are doing is the right thing, because, as the theory goes, if they don't, they are harming our future.

This context sets up an opposition between freedom and belonging.⁷ In order to belong, in order to have any semblance of togetherness with others, we must give up our freedom and follow what others expect of us, whether or not it aligns with our own needs. There is no real choice in this way of being. And it reinforces separation, because we learn that the primary way to have choice is by separating from others.

An entirely different trajectory is possible when we are born into a context of trust in life, including in our own innate capacity to live and thrive alongside and with others and all of life. This is my best understanding of the context that exists in matriarchal societies.

When we are born, we are held in arms until we ourselves show that we want to move on our own. Our flow, initially entirely undifferentiated as it was when we were in utero, is fully oriented to and held within the circle of community and togetherness of all others. As we gradually emerge from the undifferentiated flow of our early days, we increase our active capacity to care for more of our own needs. We regularly bump into others' existence and the ceaseless dance of togetherness within which

everyone's needs are cared for and find their home, even when no one has capacity or willingness to follow what someone else wants. There is no reason to separate, even in moments of challenge. Within this context, as we learn that we cannot always follow the flow of our own preferences and begin to exercise choice about what to then do, we find that choice within togetherness, alongside others who are doing the same, and always orienting to what would best work for all.

A lovely surprise awaits those of us who have re-learned to find choice within togetherness, likely similar to what we would learn organically in societies of togetherness. We learn the unexpected reality that as we walk towards togetherness, we have access to more information that exists within the larger field that includes others. As we grapple with and integrate such information, our 'choice muscle' strengthens every time we integrate instead of retreating into separation, where others' needs are not part of our equation; where impacts on others are invisible and can't influence our choice; and where resources that may assist us in what we want to do are not available to us. The more information we have, the more capacity we have to make choices that align with life and with more of our needs.

Integrative Decision-making

Because our needs are so often thwarted and negated in modern patriarchal societies, we learn that what we want is at odds with what others want, one of many painful either/or messages that patriarchal conditioning instills in us. We also learn that needs in themselves don't have power. Later on, we learn what does have power: access to resources, both material and relational.

What we don't learn, in the conditions into which most of us were born, is what to do when what we want and what someone else wants are different, as will invariably happen many times a day. We have no modelling of how to find a solution that works for both of us. More often

than not, we don't even learn to have the vision that such a solution is possible.

Instead, we learn to rely on abstract principles divorced from real needs, such as equality, fairness, justice, or rights. These are the pillars of Western moral philosophy, most chillingly exemplified by Immanuel Kant, for whom an act isn't moral if there is any emotion involved or if we want to do it, only when it is done based on duty alone! In addition to being abstract, such principles rest on the assumption that there is one right answer to every problem, often leading to escalating conflict as we now fight about what is or isn't fair, instead of looking at the information we have about what we each want, how this or that possible solution will impact us, and what resources are available to work out the situation.

In matriarchal societies, on the other hand, care is woven into the fabric of living. Clan mothers are often the ones with the most capacity to care for the whole. As we witness what adults do, we learn the art of possibility. Because our needs have been cared for within this flow when we were entirely dependent on others, we have a sense of trust in life and internal spaciousness to hold the unknown when our needs appear to be in conflict with others' needs. Bit by bit, we learn to listen deeply to what's really important to others and to us, shifting from surface strategies to the deep needs and values at the heart of our community, as we learn to recognize that we are one small part of a mysterious web of relationships that ultimately cares for all that lives.

Aligning with Maternal Gifting

All of us, into whatever society we were born, can only survive into adulthood because someone oriented to us in unconditional, unilateral giving when we could not give anything back. This has been true of humans since our very large brains created the evolutionary necessity for us to be born prematurely relative to other mammals, so that our heads could get through the birth canal

without killing our mothers. This is precisely the reason why Genevieve Vaughan's approach sees both language and the gifting flow of resources as expressions of maternal giving: the unilateral orientation to others' needs which, in matriarchal societies, is a core organizing principle, not unique to mothers or even to women.

Although a biological necessity, unilateral maternal gifting may or may not be voluntary. In modern patriarchal societies, we are born into nuclear families, where it is mostly women who do the mothering, often in isolation from other adults, without support and without being valued. Sometimes it's our own mothers and sometimes it's others who care for us, who are extended family members, paid caregivers, or, less commonly, our fathers. Those who care for us are not embedded within a larger web of community. They are often exhausted, especially if we already have a few siblings when we come into the world. Caring for us is, at times, an act of sacrifice, invisible and devalued, sometimes leading to depression, resentment, or subtle extortion of premature giving back from us.

Within the context of such families, even if anyone is truly oriented to our flow and wants to attend to our needs, it's beyond their capacity outside the context of a community. Without other people to turn to for attending to our needs, we absorb the cost on our caregivers as a reflection of who we are, rather than as a systemic limitation that impacts everyone. We learn that there isn't enough for everyone, and in this way internalize the deepest root of patriarchy: scarcity.

This is a deeply distorted version of our biological legacy as described by Humberto Maturana and Gerda Werden-Zöllner in *The Origins of Humanness in the Biology of Love*. Within the full trust in life that our evolutionary make-up prepares us for, we know, on a cellular level, that we are creatures with needs that are finite and possible to meet, despite thousands of

years of patriarchy, and especially modern Western theories, that tell us otherwise. When we are born into matriarchal societies based in love, we experience maternal gifting that is fully free, within communities that value, support, and nurture those who participate in the care of the young, their own as well as others. In such societies, those who care for us, whether our mothers or others, are fully embedded in the community, because being with us and being with other adults are not mutually exclusive. We are integrated into adult activities, coming and going as we gain capacity over our first years, learning to participate in the eternal circle of care that extends beyond us to non-human life.

When we are free to be, within a strong community in which others are, too, where there is no coercion and no submission, it is likely that by the time we have full manual dexterity, we will take our place and be active participants in the flow of unconditional giving and unconditional receiving that has sustained humans for hundreds of thousands of years.

Notes and References

- 1 *Spinning Threads of Radical Aliveness: Transcending the Legacy of Separation in Our Individual Lives*, Fearless Heart Publications, Oakland, Calif., 2014, p. 149.
- 2 You can watch an interview between Yannai and me when he was twelve at <https://tinyurl.com/4hfs3xyk> (accessed 20 May 2022).
- 3 See 'How children learn about others' needs', available at <https://tinyurl.com/46y4zej3> (accessed 20 May 2022).
- 4 See my 'The power of the soft qualities to transform patriarchy', *Self & Society: International Journal for Humanistic Psychology*, 48 (2), 2020, pp. 5–15; available at <https://tinyurl.com/2p978dez> (accessed 20 May 2022).
- 5 See, in particular, Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*.
- 6 The details of these conclusions I make about Freud, including the focus on renunciation rather than repression as the goal of therapy, are entirely beyond the scope of this short piece. See the chapter 'The failed radical: Freud, human nature,

and reason’ in my doctoral dissertation, *Beyond Reason: Reconciling Emotion with Social Theory*, available free of charge at <https://tinyurl.com/ye3deauf> (accessed 20 May 2022).

7 For details about how this functions, see ‘From obedience and shame to freedom and belonging: transforming patriarchal paradigms of child-rearing in the age of global warming’, available at <https://tinyurl.com/2p8n9p27> (accessed 20 May 2022).

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), and has taught, consulted, and engaged with projects

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SOME HUMANISTIC WISDOM

“Love is a better teacher than duty.”

Albert Einstein (1879–1955)