

Building Cultures of Partnership and Peace: Four Cornerstones*

copyright 2010 Riane Eisler

Riane Eisler is best known for her international bestseller *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (now in 23 languages) and *The Real Wealth of Nations: Creating a Caring Economics*, hailed by Archbishop Desmond Tutu as “a template for the better world we have been so urgently seeking.” Her other books include the award-winning *Tomorrow’s Children*, *The Power of Partnership*, and *Sacred Pleasure*. Dr. Eisler is President of the Center for Partnership Studies (CPS) and her research and writings are widely used as the basis for social action campaigns, including CPS’s Caring Economics Campaign and its Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence. Dr. Eisler teaches in the Transformative Leadership graduate program at CIIS, keynotes conferences worldwide, and has received many honors, including honorary PhDs and the Distinguished Peace Leadership award. Her websites are www.partnershipway.org and www.rianeeisler.com.



* * * * *

How can we end the cycles of violence and injustice that cause so much suffering and misery? Is a more peaceful and equitable world really possible? If so, what would it actually look like?

My research over several decades has focused on these questions. They are questions deeply rooted in my own early life experiences, when my parents and I narrowly escaped from Nazi Europe. Had we not been able to flee, like most of my relatives, we would almost certainly have been killed in the Holocaust

As I grew up, I looked for answers to these questions in books and universities. But I never found satisfactory ones.

I wasn’t aware at that time that studying social systems would become my life’s work. By the time I did, like many of us, I saw that our present course is not sustainable. In our time of nuclear and biological weapons, violence to settle international disputes could be disastrous for us all. So also could our once hallowed “conquest of nature” in an era when advanced technologies are causing environmental damage of unprecedented magnitude.

I saw that a grim future awaits my children – and all of us – unless there are transformative social changes. But transformation from what to what?

It was clear, as Einstein said, that the same thinking that created our problems cannot solve them. I saw that building foundations for a more peaceful and equitable world requires thinking that goes beyond conventional categories such as capitalist vs. socialist, Eastern vs. Western, religious vs. secular, or technologically developed vs. undeveloped.

I began to look for patterns cross-culturally and historically. Gradually I began to see two very different social configurations repeating themselves. Since there were no names to describe them, I called one the *domination system* and the other the *partnership system* and.

A New Perspective on History

If we look at history from the perspective of the partnership system and the domination system as two underlying social possibilities, we see that there are patterns behind seemingly random events. We see these patterns in modern times in the tension between organized challenges to traditions of domination and enormous resistance and periodic regressions. We see one progressive movement after another challenging these traditions – from the “divinely-ordained” right of despotic kings to rule their “subjects,” the “divinely-ordained” right of men to rule the women and children in the “castles” of their homes, the “divinely-ordained” right of one race or nation to rule over another, all the way to man’s “divinely ordained” right to dominate and conquer nature. But we also see fierce resistance to this movement toward partnership, and, even after gains were made, regressions such as those of the Nazis to more rigid domination systems.

We further see something of pivotal importance that is also still ignored in conventional social analyses. This is that there is a direct connection between, on the one hand, whether a society is peaceful and equitable or warlike and inequitable and, on the other hand, how it structures the most fundamental human relations: the relations between the female and male halves of humanity and between them and their daughters and sons.

The reason, simply put, is that it is in these primary human relations that children first learn what is considered normal or abnormal, possible or impossible, moral or immoral. They learn either respect for human rights or to accept human rights violations as only normal, even moral. They learn to avoid violence or to accept and even idealize it. In short, these formative relations unconsciously shape how people think and feel, including what kinds of leaders and policies they vote for.

This explains why those who want to push us back to a more autocratic, violent, and unjust social structure uniformly work to maintain or impose rigid rankings of domination in gender and parent-child relations. For the Nazis a top priority was getting women back into their “traditional” place in a “traditional” family – code words for a top-down, male-dominated, authoritarian family. This was also a top priority for Khomeini in Iran and Stalin in the former Soviet Union. And it still is for so-called religious fundamentalists today – both Eastern or Western – who also believe in “holy wars” and authoritarian rule in the state or tribe.

Yet, ironically, for many people who consider themselves progressives, women’s rights and children’s rights are still “just” women’s and children’s issues. This is why we need social categories that show the connection between what is considered normal in gender and childhood relations and whether societies are peaceful or violent, equitable or inequitable.

The New Social Categories

Cross-culturally and through history, societies adhering closely to the domination system have the following configuration:

- Top-down authoritarian control in both the family and the state or tribe;
- The subordination of the female half of humanity to the male half, and, with this, the devaluation of anything stereotypically considered “soft” or “feminine” such as caring and nonviolence;
- A high degree of institutionalized or built-in violence, whether in the form of wife and child beating or warfare and terrorism, as fear and force ultimately maintain domination;
- Beliefs that our only alternatives are dominating or being dominated and that – beginning with the rigid ranking of male over female – hierarchies of domination are divinely or naturally ordained.

Moving toward the partnership side of the spectrum - and it is always a matter of degree - we see a different configuration:

- A more democratic organization in both the family and state or tribe;
- Both halves of humanity are equally valued, and stereotypically feminine values such as caring and nonviolence (which are considered “unmanly” in the domination system) are highly regarded, whether they are embodied in women or men;

- A less violent way of living, since violence is not needed to maintain rigid rankings of domination, be it in intimate, national, or international relations;
- Beliefs that present relations of mutual respect, accountability, and benefit as natural and support hierarchies of actualization, where power is used to empower rather than disempower others.

Understanding these two different social configurations makes it possible to identify four cornerstones foundational to a more peaceful and just world.

The First Cornerstone: Childhood Relations

The physical structure of the human brain is not set at birth. Neuroscience shows that the neural pathways that will largely determine intelligence, creativity, predisposition to violent or nonviolent behavior, empathy or insensitivity, venturesomeness or overconformity, and other critical matters, are formed in interaction with a child's early experiences.

While people can, and do, change, for a majority of people early experiences and relations are critical. If these relations are violent, children learn that violence from those who are more powerful toward those who are less powerful is acceptable as a means of dealing with conflicts and/or problems. If family relations based on chronic violations of human rights are considered normal and moral, they provide mental and emotional models for condoning such violations in other relations.

Fortunately, some people reject these teachings. But unfortunately many replicate them, not only in their intimate relations but in all relations – including international ones. Coercive, inequitable, and violent childrearing - dominator childrearing - is therefore foundational to the imposition and maintenance of a coercive, inequitable, and chronically violent social organization.

Since it is through childhood experiences and relations that people acquire habits of feeling, thinking, and behavior, a global campaign against abuse and violence in childhood relations is urgently needed. This has a number of core elements.

- The first is education: raising awareness of the consequences - personal and global - of dominator or partnership childhood relations, as well as education providing both women and men the knowledge and skills necessary for empathic, sensitive, nonviolent, authoritative rather than authoritarian childrearing.
- The second component is legal: the enactment and enforcement of laws criminalizing child abuse as well as legislation funding education for nonviolent, empathic, and fair childrearing.

- The third component entails changing the mass media so children are not exposed to constant representation of violence as a means of resolving conflicts and “comedies” where family members abuse and humiliate each other.
- The fourth component is engaging spiritual and religious leaders to take a strong stand against intimate violence – the violence that every year blights, and all too often takes, the lives of millions of children and women, and perpetuates cycles of violence in all relations. This is the mission of the Spiritual Alliance to Stop Intimate Violence (SAIV) that I co-founded. Please see www.saiiv.net for resources and information.

The Second Cornerstone: Gender Relations

How a society constructs the roles and relations of the two basic halves of humanity – women and men – not only affects women’s and men’s individual life options; it affects families, education, religion, politics, and economics. It directly affects a society’s guiding values. It is key to a nation's general quality of life.

For example, *Women, Men, and the Global Quality of Life* – a study based on statistics from 89 nations conducted by the Center for Partnership Studies (www.partnershipway.org) – found that in significant ways the status of women can be a better predictor of general quality of life than Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the conventional measure of a nation's economic health.

An obvious reason is simply that women are half the population. But as long as the half of humanity with which values such as caring, compassion, and nonviolence are stereotypically associated – the female half – remains subordinate and excluded from social governance, so also will these values.

Stereotypically feminine traits, such as caring and nonviolence, can be found in both women and men. Stereotypical women's work, such as taking care of children and maintaining a clean and healthy home environment, can be performed by both women and men. However, in cultures or subcultures adhering closely to the domination system, these traits and activities are considered appropriate only for women and inappropriate for "real men."

This is why giving priority to so-called "women's issues" has enormous implications for the environment, peace, population, economic equity, and political democracy.

A sign of hope is that there is today strong movement towards real partnership in all spheres of life between women and men, along with a blurring of rigid gender stereotypes. Men are nurturing babies and women are entering positions of economic and political leadership. But this movement remains slow and

localized, and in some cultures and subcultures is fiercely opposed; for example, by so-called religious fundamentalist leaders.

What is needed is a global campaign for equitable and nonviolent gender relations backed by the world's progressive leaders.

As long as women still hold a small minority of political positions, we cannot really talk of representative democracy. As long as boys and men learn to equate "real masculinity" with violence and control - be it through "heroic" epics, war toys, or violent TV, films, and video games - we cannot realistically expect to end the arms build-ups that are today bankrupting our world and the terrorism and aggressive warfare that in our age of nuclear and chemical warfare threaten our survival. Nor can we realistically expect an end to racism, anti-Semitism, and other ugly isms as long as people learn early on to equate difference – beginning with the fundamental difference between female and male – with superiority or inferiority, with dominating or being dominated.

The Third Cornerstone: Economic Relations

Current economic systems – whether capitalist, socialist, or communist – are endangering our natural life-support systems. The gap between haves and have-nots has been growing both between and within nations. Poverty seems intractable, speculation is rampant, and so are insensitive and ultimately destructive financial practices.

As documented in my book, *The Real Wealth of Nations*, we need a new way of structuring economics. The real wealth of a nation – indeed, of our world -- is not financial; it consists of the contributions of people and of nature. We therefore need economic indicators, policies, and practices that give visibility and value to the most important human work: the work of caring for people, beginning in childhood, and of caring for nature. We need a caring economics.

This is essential not only for human and environmental reasons, but for purely economic ones. To create the “high quality human capital” economists tell us is needed for the postindustrial information/knowledge era we must recognize what both psychology and neuroscience tell us: that this capital largely depends on the kind of care children receive. We therefore need strong social support for the caregiving work performed in both the market and the household economic sectors.

There are important trends in this direction. For example, most West European nations offer monetary assistance and education for parenting, along with paid parental leave, health care, and high quality early childhood education. Satellite economic indicators are beginning to count the economic value of this work. For

example, the Swiss government found that if the unpaid work in households were included, it would constitute 70 percent of the reported Swiss GDP.

But the persistent failure to give real value to the “women’s work” of caregiving helps explain why poverty and hunger have proven so intractable. Indeed, it makes no sense to talk of hunger and poverty in generalities when the mass of the world's poor and the poorest of the poor are women and children. Even in the rich United States, women over the age of 65 are, according to U.S. Census statistics, twice as likely to be poor as men over 65. Most of these women are, or were, caregivers.

This can, and must, be changed. The Center for Partnership Studies’ Caring Economics Campaign is designed to help policy makers and the public recognize the importance of moving to a caring economics. It offers resources, training, and advocacy opportunities at www.partnershipway.org.

We need economic inventions such as caregiver tax credits, Social Security, and subsidies for childcare. We need economic indicators that give visibility and value to this essential “women’s work” – whether it is performed by women or men.

Initiatives such as CPS’s Real Wealth Public Policy Project showcase indicators that go beyond GDP to include the environment as well as levels of health, education, and poverty – and urge special attention to the enormous economic contribution of care work in both the market and household economic sectors, as well as to the status of women and children as predictors of both quality of life and long-term economic success.

Development policies also need to shift their focus to women. Many studies show that in most regions of the developing world women allocate far more of their resources to their families than men do.

We should encourage and reward economic and social inventions that give value to caring and caregiving work in both the market and non-market economic sectors. For example, we have national programs to train soldiers to effectively take life - and we have pensions for them. By contrast, we have no national programs for training women and men to effectively care for children - even though we have solid scientific knowledge about what is and is not effective and humane childcare.

The shift from industrial to the postindustrial knowledge/service era, with increasing automation and other technologies that will bring even more radical changes, demands a redefinition of what is productive work. People need meaningful work. A negative income tax or guaranteed income for doing nothing is no solution. Clearly the most important and meaningful work is that of caring

for other humans, particularly our children and our growing elderly population, and for our natural environment.

Redefining productive work also imbues work with what it lacks in a domination system - where it is primarily motivated by fear and the artificial creation of scarcities through wars and misallocation and misdistribution of resources. Giving value to caring and caregiving imbues work with meaning. It gives work a spiritual dimension, since at the core of all spiritual traditions is the valuing of compassion and love.

The Fourth Cornerstone: Stories, Beliefs, Morality, and Spirituality

We humans live by stories. The message of many of the stories we inherited from earlier times is that dominating or being dominated are the only alternatives. The proliferation of stories about relations built on mutual benefit, mutual respect, and mutual accountability signals a revolution in consciousness.

But for this revolution in consciousness to succeed, we need more than the emergence in bits and pieces of new stories. We need a concerted effort through the arts, music, and literature, as well as through science. We must show that the struggle for our future is not between religion and secularism, right and left, East and West, or capitalism and socialism, but between traditions of domination and a partnership way of life. We must spread the new language for describing societies offered by the partnership system and domination system.

These changes in language and stories have enormous implications for both spirituality and morality. Spirituality becomes not so much an escape to otherworldly realms from the suffering inherent in a dominator world, but an active engagement in creating a better world right here on Earth. And rather than being used to coerce and dominate, morality is imbued with caring and love.

Conclusion

To spread the consciousness that we can, and must, leave behind traditions of domination requires courage. It takes courage to challenge domination and violence in both international relations and intimate relations. It takes courage to actively oppose injustice and cruelty in all spheres of life: not only in the so-called public sphere of politics and business but in the so-called private sphere of parent-child, gender, and sexual relations.

It may not be popular, and may even be dangerous to do this, since domination and violence in intimate and intergroup relations are encoded in some religious and ethnic traditions that are our heritage from a more rigid dominator past. But it must be done.

We are at a time when the mix of high technology and the domination system can take us to an evolutionary dead end. Using high technology in service of conquest and domination – whether of people or of nature – is not sustainable.

Every one of us can play a role in the cultural transformation from domination to partnership worldwide. Working together, we can build the foundations for a more peaceful and equitable way of living on our beautiful Earth.

*“It is not enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it.
And it isn’t enough to believe in it. One must work at it.”
Eleanor Roosevelt*

** Different versions of this article have been previously published.*