

SHINING AS ILLUMINATORS AROUND A SHARED VISION FOR OUR WORLD: A CONVERSATION WITH ELI INGRAHAM

Interviewed by Riane Eisler, JD, PhD(hon)

Abstract

Riane Eisler interviews Eli Ingraham, recent CEO of the Center for Partnership Systems and currently working with the Transition Collective on bioregional efforts in South Africa and North America.

Keywords: Eli Ingraham, systems theory, ecologic, poesis

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Riane Eisler: Eli, you are the Guest Editor of this issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies (IJPS)*, and I want to welcome you and thank you for all your work doing this. In this interview, I would like to start with the question of what led you to take this on.

Eli Ingraham: Riane, first I want to congratulate you and the *IJPS* team for celebrating the journal's 10th year of publication. What a remarkable achievement. It is such an honor to be the Guest Editor of edit this issue of the journal as you begin celebrating your 10th anniversary year. Learning about *IJPS*'s vision and mission and getting to know the editorial team are what really inspired me to get more involved. I was particularly drawn to the journal's intention to *disrupt* the conventions of traditional academic journals by expanding access, inviting transdisciplinary research, and offering

multilingual versions. I once heard Cristine Takuá, Indigenous elder and educator, say that “there is no universe in university” (2019, Takuá). This really resonated with me. I sense this same sentiment in *IJPS*’s efforts to foster holistic thinking and inclusive participation in advancing your partnership paradigm. Today’s challenges are complex and interdependent, and it’s going to take the kinds of whole-systems solutions profiled in *IJPS* to address these meta-challenges.

Eisler: Can you tell us a bit about your life and what drew you to your work?

Ingraham: From a very young age, I was one of those kids who preferred the world of books to the actual world around me. It wasn’t that I fancied imaginary worlds, it was more about wondering why the world I lived in was so different. This feeling lingered with me through college, where I struggled to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. For some of us, it was more of an arduous process of elimination rather than a clear direction. Eventually, I combined three majors into an international relations degree because I knew I wanted to work at the global level. Without really knowing it, I was instinctively drawn to systems level issues. Sadly though, things like social impact, regenerative economics, even sustainability, were not obvious professional pursuits at that time. In hindsight, I know social scientists like yourself, Donella Meadows, Fritjof Kapra, and many others, *were* working in this space. Had I only known then!

After graduating from college, I worked as a corporate paralegal for a few years before deciding that the amount of paperwork involved outweighed my enthusiasm for jurisprudence. I’m kidding, but only a little. It was at this time, though, that computers were being introduced into the workplace, and no one knew how to use them. I quickly enrolled in a two-year night program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to learn coding and microprocessing. Believe it or not, I had been introduced to mainframe computers in 1972 when one mysteriously appeared in our high school. I distinctly remember the victorious moment when the tickertape popped out indicating I had successfully done my math homework using punch cards. I recall that I was the only girl in the class who thought this extracurricular activity was a lot of fun. From that moment

on, I knew this new technology would be part of my life and would undoubtedly change our world.

My facility with computers and coding served me well and I rose very quickly as a techno-business hybrid, which in the 1980s was unusual. I had landed in finance, but soon realized it was not aligned with my desire to do something more purposeful in the world. I will take a moment to say that throughout my career, the misogyny and sexual harassment I experienced was profound. Looking back now, I cannot believe the indignities I, and other women in the workplace, had to endure. Wellesley College had prepared me to walk with confidence as a woman in the world. It had not prepared me for the institutionalized *androcracy* that permeated every fabric of society.

Life in the 1980s was a bit dystopian for me. We were losing friends to AIDS every day and were in unrelenting grief. I also remember going to anti-nuke rallies led by Helen Caldicott and women's rights protests led by Gloria Steinem. I remember celebrating Sandra Day O'Connor and Sally Ride as two exciting female firsts. But my own path toward systems change as a practice still hadn't emerged for me. My journey seemed incredibly circuitous and fragmented at the time. But every detour somehow led me to greater clarity. Sometimes I took deliberate detours. During the first 15 years of working, I took every fifth year off and traveled, usually alone, just to walk the earth, learn other cultures, and broaden my perspective. Mark Twain said that "travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness" (Twain, 1869). I just love that quote.

It was on one such sojourn in the late 1980s that two things colluded to change my life. I read *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (by you, of course) (Eisler, 1987) and *The Turning Point: Science, Society, and the Rising Culture* by Fritjof Capra (1982). It really was a turning point for me. It was like hearing my native tongue for the first time. Both books made me see the world as a holistic organism, see humans as part of nature not separate from it, and see that androcratic forces had been driving the extractive, exploitive, and inequitable practices that were so dominant in the world. I realized that not only could the world operate differently, but there were

others already forging a new operating system. Alas, all that computer training might actually be useful (wink).

Eisler: Can you tell us more about how your work led you to the Center for Partnership Systems (CPS) and therefore to *IJPS*?

Ingraham: You and Fritjof Capra were my first guides into systems theory and systems change. I remember musing that if only I had discovered your work in college, I would have aggressively pursued both social and natural sciences. But alas, after a number of gigs in digital innovation, public media, and film, I became Chief Networks Officer, or head of social impact, for YPO (formerly the Young Presidents Organization). My episodic path finally made sense to me: social code led to social technologies led to social communities led to social enterprise led to social impact. The through-line of my career had been trying to see how we, as interdependent humans, could leverage creative technologies to benefit people and planet more equitably. *How could they be used to heal the world?*

In the 2010s, it was thrilling to work with thousands of YPO CEOs around the world on sustainable business, social entrepreneurship, economic development, global diplomacy and peace action, community resiliency, and helping disadvantaged children. During this time, I became aware of the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals (UN.org, 2000) and Sustainable Development Goals (UN.org, 2016). I also read the works of early pioneers of restorative justice: Rachel Carson, Edward Goldsmith, Buckminster Fuller, David Brower, Elisabet Sahtouris, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Eckhart Tolle, Rudolf Steiner, and many others.

After YPO, I worked with a renowned non-governmental organization, Pyxera Global, on their TIE Global Artisans initiative, which focused on alleviating poverty and elevating cultural entrepreneurship among African textile weavers by providing access to quality materials, modern technologies, and global markets. Then, as CEO of the Sager Foundation, I managed the Science for Monks & Nuns project in partnership with

His Holiness the Dalai Lama, bridging Eastern and Western science. In addition, I worked with the Tibetan Library and Archives to digitize ancient Tibetan manuscripts and oversaw the Sager Ganza microfinance project in Rwanda serving over 10,000 woman-owned businesses after the genocide.

During this professional immersion in social impact, I also embarked on what I call a “self-determined graduate degree” in transformative studies. It started with a four-month executive course in Business Sustainability Management from Cambridge University in 2017. Seven years and 14 certifications later, I have studied everything from regenerative economics, leadership, and finance, to designing resilient communities, decolonizing sustainability, circular economics, ecological design, bioregionalism, awareness-based systems change, ergodic investing, and even systems theory *with Fritjof Capra*. This polydidactic approach has been immensely gratifying, and has helped me put “the universe in university,” as I mentioned earlier in this interview.

In January 2023, you and I were introduced by our friend John Havens, then a CPS Advisory Board member and now a member of our Board of Directors. After a number of engaging conversations with you, I came on board as interim CEO to help steward operations, project advancement, and fundraising efforts. Life, in its inevitable, systems-oriented way, had come full circle. Thirty-five years after being inspired by your and Fritjof Capra’s transcendent work, I had studied with the man himself, and here I was, working directly with the iconic Riane Eisler. It was a definitive moment for me, a true gift of realization, whereby I understood that regardless of the path, some inner drive had always moved me toward my purpose.

Eisler: You continue to advise the Center for Partnership Systems and are now involved with IJPS. Why do you consider it important to continue making the partnership system known to others?

Ingraham: We are living in a system that's been defined and driven for millennia by a certain "logic" and we need to reinstate a paradigm driven by an "ecologic," if you will. One is reductive, the other is restorative. In your framework, one is domination-based, the other is partnership-based. Every generation plays a role in human history, for better or worse. And like it or not, our generation is tasked with the future of civilization.

I like to cite environmentalist David Brower who brilliantly mapped 4.5 billion years of evolution against a literal 7-day creation period. According to his model, humans appeared on the scene at 30 seconds before midnight on the seventh day. Human language and communication appeared at 2/3 of a second on the last day (Brower & Chapple, 2021). So our generation is somewhere at about half a second before we all turn into pumpkins.

The point is, in less than a proverbial minute, humans dramatically impacted 4.5 billion years of evolutionary history. If we can do that *without* thinking about our actions, imagine what we can do if we put our minds to work in a conscious way. Human consciousness implies collective intelligence, but we need to move our consciousness beyond the transmission of information and toward the coordination of behavior for the greater good. The critical work of our time is to help *scale consciousness*, and to move from collective intelligence to *collective action*.

Your Cultural Transformation Theory (or Partnership-Domination Framework) provides an important roadmap for people to understand the *levers* of change, as articulated in your four cornerstones: Family & Childhood, Gender, Economics, Language & Narrative (Eisler & Fry, 2019). Imbalance in any of these foundational areas creates disequilibrium across the entire system. We don't have to look too far to understand why the world isn't working for the vast majority of humankind: widespread trauma in families, deep-seated gender inequity, widening socio-economic disparities, and combative, winner-take-all narratives. Layered within and between these four cornerstones are equally profound issues of racial discrimination, anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments, coloniality, and environmental collapse, among many others.

It's easy to say that we need new models of civilization that benefit people and planet, but new models within a broken system are like “putting new wine in old wineskins,” as the parable goes. We need more than new models, and we need more than a change in mindset, though both are essential. Many of us are already aware that we have surpassed four of the nine planetary boundaries required to prevent total ecosystem collapse. We already know we are not on track to reduce global warming to less than 2 degrees. But this knowledge isn't creating change fast enough. *Business as usual* isn't going to get us there. *Change as usual* isn't going to get us there, either. If we are going to save civilization, we need a colossal, collective *breakthrough of consciousness* that breaks open our will to act around a shared vision. What we are experiencing is an existential crisis, a crisis of morality, and of *coordinated free will*.

What drew me to your work, Riane, was your ability to reach back into history and prove that the thread of caring, equity, and interdependence (with nature and with one another) existed first. And although it has been frayed by dominant forces, it is still reverberating on the earth today. Your published insights are the clarion call to all “imaginal cells,” telling them to not lose hope, to double-down, to draw power from the ancient wisdom of those who came before and laid down the path. As this movement and momentum grows, so too does our ability to introduce new ways of doing things. I'm not sure when the tipping point will be, when we'll see real systems change, but we'll never know unless we keep at it. That is why it's important to put forward new models, so others can visualize what a better world looks like. As with the caterpillar's imaginal cells, these new models effectively *hold the vision of the butterfly*, so that we unite around a shared vision of change.

Eisler: How can readers of *IJPS* support our work of moving to a more equitable, sustainable, and gender-balanced partnership system?

Ingraham: Following on my last thought, this brings me to why *IJPS* is so important. None of us can solve the issues of the world by ourselves. It is our combined, repeated, and synchronized activities, no matter on what level, that will turn domination systems

into partnership systems. It is our boldly holding up the mirror of reality that refracts better ways of interbeing. It's what historian Howard Zinn meant when he wrote, "Small acts when multiplied by millions of people, can transform the world" (Zinn, 2003). It's known as the multiplier or butterfly effect.

IJPS diligently profiles those who are applying partnership principles in their lives. By recording these stories, others are inspired, get ideas, and pollinate partnership practices around the globe. It is an important mechanism for replicating transformative works through a medium whose DNA is rooted in the partnership ethos.

Again, I want to say how honored I am to elevate the ideas and good works of the contributors curated in this issue of *IJPS*. Many of these authors I know personally; all of them are illuminators, shining a light in this world. Readers will explore topics on ecosocial reciprocity, colonial sustainability, the ethics of artificial intelligence, conscious technologies, responsible leadership, community currencies, watersheds and bioregionalism, and more.

We bring about the world. It does not happen to us. We make choices. We act or we do not act. Both have consequences. The Greeks called this phenomenon *poiesis*, which is the root word for poetry. It means to bring something into being that did not exist before. It carries the essence of creativity, culture, and civilization itself. We need people to embrace *poiesis*. We need people to bring a part of themselves that did not exist before into being.

So every day, may we take up the work with gratitude and grit. May we stay open, stay undefended in our hearts, so that the real work of healing this world from the inside gets done. Let's not leak energy but use our life-force as light-bearers, remembering that we walk after those who came before and ahead of those who come after. We are one moment in a long line of humanity. Let's use our moment brilliantly.

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Riane Eisler, JD, PhD(h), is President of the Center for Partnership Systems, and Editor-in-Chief of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*.

Eli Ingraham recently served as CEO of the Center for Partnership Systems, an organization founded by Riane Eisler to accelerate the shift to partnerism, a socio-economic model based on four interconnected cornerstones: Family/Childhood, Gender, Economics, and Narratives/Language that values caring, nature, and shared prosperity. Eli is currently working with the Transition Collective on bioregional efforts in South Africa and North America. She was formerly CEO of the Sager Foundation, managing its Science for Monks & Nuns project in partnership with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and Sager Ganza's microfinance project in Rwanda supporting women-owned businesses in the aftermath of the genocide. Previously, Ingraham led TIE Global Artisans, an initiative of PYXERA Global focused on alleviating poverty among African textile weavers. Eli serves on the advisory boards of various global impact organizations, including the Knowledge Impact Network, Center for Responsible Leadership, Women4Solutions, and AfroValley Blockchain. Eli's career began in finance and technology. She was a consultant with Fortune 50 companies on digital acceleration, and worked for the Public Broadcasting System and National Public Radio developing digital media startups. She was Chief Networks Officer at YPO, overseeing their 50+ business, social impact, and personal interest member networks. She founded Impact Imperative to help

companies align investment objectives with social impact imperatives. Earlier in life, Eli was an ordained minister and studied sacred texts and literature for 12 years. She lives in Newton, Massachusetts with her wife and daughter, whom they adopted from Kazakhstan.

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