

## DISCUSSING SENSITIVE ISSUES THROUGH A PARTNERSHIP LENS: A CONVERSATION WITH MY TEENAGED SON

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### Abstract

This article explores parenting and the construction of masculinity through the lens of Partnership. Framed by the author's conversation with her teenaged son, the paper opens with a definition, exploration, and cultural contextualization of *androcracy*. Fundamental intersections between the disciplines of the Partnership Model and Women's Spirituality are then introduced, locating story and storytelling, spirit, and relationship as cornerstones for shifting from the Domination Model to a Partnership Model. Interconnected theories and praxes of feminism, radical feminism, womanism, and the Womanist Idea, as well as the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, are defined and proposed as tools for educating children about the Domination/Control and interlocking systems of oppression we live in, and how to enact Partnership/Respect principles in our relationships. The paper proposes that through sharing and enacting a multiplicity of counter narratives that reflect the tenets of Partnership, parents and care givers not only actively model for children Partnership values, but they also equip children with an explicit understanding of the harmful systems we live in and the means to challenge and shift them. Highlighting a multiplicity of traditions that share the same core values of empathy, compassion, and care for all living beings, the paper concludes with a set of tools for employing foundational precepts of Partnership Parenting, from sharing story to embodying and promoting ways to care for self, community, and the world.

Keywords: Partnership/Respect Model; Domination/Control Model; androcracy; feminism; spiritual activism; Riane Eisler; *tikkun olam*; standpoint theory; intersectional oppression; Womanist Idea; Layli Maparyan; misogyny; patriarchy; Partnership Parenting; social location; gender-based violence; care work; Innate Divinity

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The first time I read Riane Eisler's book *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987), I was twenty, just five years older than my eldest son is today. Back then, the last thing on my mind was the children I might give birth to someday. Start a family? Thanks, anyway, but I was just getting started—on the paramount charge my mother, who *had* started a family young, had long impressed upon me: earn a college degree.

The year was 1990. Nelson Mandela would soon be released from prison. Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, a book chock-full of women and the stories they tell, hit the *New York Times* Bestseller List. And, for the very first time in my own life, I would sit, taking notes in longhand, in a university course that was not only *about* women's lived experiences and histories, but was also taught entirely *by* women, from the professor to the teaching assistants.

Many a peer readily advised that I should have been studying "real" subjects, and not such trifles as women's stories and lived lives. "*Real* subjects?" I'd reply, thinking, the word "trifle" itself encapsulated the reason everyone should be learning about women's suppressed—and very real—histories in the first place. Not only women like my mother and grandmothers, but also women not at all like me. Women the world over. Women who, across all social locations, were affected by *androcracy*, a "social system ruled through force or the threat of force by men" (Eisler, 1995, p. 105). Clearly, the area of women's studies had everything to do with *everything*, including what I would learn about the Partnership Model, which "supports mutually respectful and caring relations," by helping us improve seven key relationships in our lives, including those with ourselves, intimates, and communities (p. Eisler, 2002, p. xv). This meant real

possibility—for an altogether different way of being, wherein violence rooted in patriarchy, or “institutionalized male dominance,” did not rule the day, and women, men, and Earth were all valued as sovereign, ensouled beings, rather than as commodities (Jensen, 2007, p. 38). It was a world I had keenly hungered for as a child, and it was the kind of world I envisaged everyone—my mother, my future children—living in one day.

That imagined world, of course, differs vastly from the world in which I am currently raising three sons. Each day seemingly yields another iteration of the Domination/Control Model, defined by Eisler (2002) as having a “high degree of fear and violence, ranking of [the] male half of humanity over [the] female half,” as having an “authoritarian social structure,” and whose “myths and stories idealize domination and violence, and present them as normal” (p. 212). This normalization is currently exemplified by ubiquitous mass shootings and a recent, liberatory deluge of survivors’ accounts of sexual violence that has shaped their lives, *androcracy* continually reasserting itself through the specific, systemic *drip, drip, drip* of misogyny and rigid subordination of femininity, and those who are feminized, to masculinity.

Growing up, I understood implicitly that I was living in a culture predicated upon the Domination Model, but as a child, I hadn’t the vocabulary to articulate it. I didn’t know that the kind of marginalization the women in my family experienced had a name, much less that it was part of a system hurting *everyone*. I also didn’t know that I would someday be elucidating for my own children the system I can now name—*androcracy*—and its present-tense hold on us all.

It is watching my sons navigate the dominant culture that impels me to intervene and interrupt the Domination system in any way I can, letting them know *whenever* I can: by shifting to a Partnership/Respect Model, we can enact a better way. A *loving* way. A way in which we all take part in the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*, or repair of the world, a practice we engage in in a Reform Jewish temple community, my family’s

spiritual home. A *spiritual* way that honors the sacredness, agency, and humanity of *all*. A way in which we recognize what Layli Maparyan (2012) refers to as every living being's divine light, or "Innate Divinity" (p. 3). A way in which all beings will ultimately thrive.

Riane Eisler (2011), in discussing a transition to this type of culture, cites storytelling and the spirit of narrative as one of the key cornerstones in effecting this shift: "We humans live by stories... 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" (p. 1). Scholars of Women's Spirituality, and of feminist and womanist theory, also cite centering story and lived experience as both a legitimate research method and as a critical praxis for shifting dominant culture, in large part because everyday women's stories have systematically been omitted from prevalent histories and from academia. Maparyan (2012) frames it thus: "Personal experience and personal reality are the ultimate arbiters of truth, because one trusts the Self to know. Truth obtained through dialogue and in relationship with others constitutes as second avenue of validation, because one respects one's fellows and values the process of sharing knowledge and experience" (p. 41). Similarly, Leslie Marmon Silko (2012) writes, "Old stories and new stories are essential: They tell us who we are, and they enable us to survive... if you don't have the stories, you don't have anything" (p. xxvi). In the sharing of our stories, and in emphasizing stories from long-suppressed points of view, we can foment a "proliferation of stories about relations built on mutual benefit, mutual respect, and mutual accountability" (Eisler, 2011) and potently challenge the notion that "dominating or being dominated are the only alternatives" (p. 1).

It is in the spirit of Partnership and interdisciplinary inquiry, and through employing personal narrative about my own Partnership Parenting in this article, that I will highlight fundamental intersections between the disciplines of Partnership Studies and Women's Spirituality, which both recognize story, spirit, and relationship as necessary

cornerstones of cultural change. Throughout, I will draw upon my lived experience, enacting a key tenet of Partnership and feminist practice. I will also define concepts and terms central to radical feminist and womanist theory, illustrating explicit parallels between Partnership and Women's Spirituality.

## **PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS: RESPONDING WITH RESPECT**

As a feminist mother practicing Partnership Parenting, I value the power of everyday storytelling. I also value the use of accurate language. In so doing, I am practicing truthfulness in my relationships, with myself, and with my children. Shying away from candid speech or avoidance of frank terminology during conversations about sensitive subjects, including the systems we live in, often serves to conceal truth, undermining mutual respect, which in turn hinders trust. But by honestly naming issues, ideas, and systems, we can build trust and contribute to subverting the Domination Model, which aims to uphold the status quo with intentional obfuscations including imprecise language, a misleading vocabulary, and deleterious fictions.

In *The Power of Partnership: Seven Relationships that Will Change Your Life*, Eisler (2002) offers comparable examples of prevalent terms from both Domination/Control and Partnership/Respect vocabularies (p. 224). One example is “family values” (domination) versus “valuing families” (Partnership). The former conveys an ideal without meaningful action; the latter conveys actively caring for others. It is in the spirit of valuing my family that I employ Partnership vocabulary in my relationships, especially with my teens, including a recent conversation about a sensitive issue with my oldest son, Zev, when I opted for precise and honest language and conversation that did not shy away from explicitly naming aspects of the situation he presented in a heart-to-heart with me.

It was evening, during the homework shift. As usual, we were stationed at the kitchen table, which was bestrewn with loose-leaf binders, books, and mandarin orange peels.

Zev, who recently turned fifteen, was absent-mindedly tapping his pencil, less-than-focused on the intricate problem sets he'd been assigned for geometry.

"Mama," he finally said. "You'll never guess what I overheard before school."

"What's that?" I asked.

"These girls in my class. They were talking about how if they have kids someday, they want to be sure to keep their guys happy by not getting all messed up down there."

"Down there'?" I asked, not really a question.

"*Their* words," he explained, probably because, as a component of my parenting, I've relentlessly educated my sons about how to plainly name parts of the human anatomy, including how to differentiate between a vagina and a vulva. This distinction is often ignored in our society, which is a result of the Domination Model, whose objectification of women includes an explicit refusal to properly name female genitalia, or acknowledge that women's genitalia consists of anything beyond a vaginal opening. Hence, I found it unsurprising that these young girls similarly refrained from naming their own female genitalia. I also found it distressing: it reified our cultural refusal to name patriarchy itself (hooks, 2004, p. 28).

"It gets worse," Zev went on. "They said they'll give *anything* to have Caesarian sections when the time comes, so they won't stretch out their vaginas. They're afraid if they push out a baby, their vaginas will be ruined and their husbands or boyfriends will get grossed out and dump them."

I almost couldn't decide what was more tragic. Was it the abysmal failure of public school sex education curriculum, which continued to decenter love, respect, and relationship, and instead to glorify the act of heterosexual intercourse, the agent-penis

entering the acted-upon vagina, as both the linchpin of the conversation and the epitome of one's fully-realized sexuality, rather than but one selection on a fabulously varied menu? Was it the fact that I'd already heard of this trend to eschew vaginal birth, along with the concomitant literature about expensive, elective post-partum labioplasty, in order to "restore" one's desirability to men? Was it that Zev's classmates had actually referred to their genitals as "down there?" Was it that nowhere in the discussion was anyone celebrating their sexuality, intimate partnerships, reproductive capacities, and childbirth as the earthy, embodied, and ineffably affecting experiences they could be, wherever one's gender and sexual orientation lay on the infinite spectrum of possibilities? Was it that the young women were already anticipating a *hypothetical* expression of extreme heteropatriarchy, or that the slightest change to their vaginas resulting from giving birth would render them entirely expendable by their someday partners, as if one human being could actually own and dispose of another, echoing how those with privilege have long used the bodies of women and women's reproductive labor, particularly the bodies of women of color, be it through slavery, colonization, or otherwise?

It was all of those things, so I began at what felt like a beginning.

"What do *you* think about the term 'down there'?" I asked Zev, who, along with his brothers, engages in no such avoidant terminology. "How did it make you feel, hearing your peers talk about themselves and their relationships that way?"

"It makes me feel terrible," Zev said. "For them—for everyone." He shifted around, gave me a look. "I mean, what do *you* think? Have you ever felt about yourself that way?"

"You mean, like your classmates feel about their bodies?"

Zev nodded.

“Yes,” I told him. “Many times.”

## **PARTNERSHIP PARENTING AND STANDPOINT THEORY: BUILDING EMPATHY AND COMPASSION**

As I mention above, personal story is a critical component of the Partnership Model and of Women’s Spirituality, which maintains that all women’s individual lived experiences and points of view, or standpoints, produce distinctly individual perspectives on various forms of oppression, from sexism to homophobia to ableism to racism, to name a few. While women’s social locations will affect their own particular standpoints, women in our society, who as group perform the bulk of the world’s care work, are uniquely situated to reveal through their stories the inherent contradiction in—and yet imperative of *someone’s*—doing the “crucial work of caregiving in a society that does not value caregiving” (McCann & Kim, 2013, p. 345).

My own standpoint is this: I am a writer, artist, and mother living in a Domination/Control Model culture. I am an able-bodied, straight, cis-gendered female racialized as white, with economic security, and I partner in life, love, and parenting with a Jewish man. My entire life has been informed by the family disease of drug and alcohol addiction, including my brother’s fatal overdose, and by the gender-based violence that affected, without exception, every girl on the street where I grew up, violence whose repercussions continue to reverberate among us some forty years on. While I may never know the extent to which the boys and men on my street may also have suffered such violence, I believe that they, too, were deeply and adversely affected by the Domination Model. Turning the lens back on my youth, I can see a composite of the hurt incurred by this system and how it has fanned out to touch the survivors and perpetrators alike, and what I teach my sons hinges upon this belief: that patriarchy hurts everyone—in the same way Partnership can fan out and heal everyone.



My sons know much of my standpoint, and how I've responded to the system we live in, namely through the act of storytelling and storyholding in a number of spiritual capacities. I have been open with them about my involvement in a 12-Step program. I have spoken candidly about the devastation gender-based violence wreaks in both survivors' and perpetrators' lives. I have included them in my activism and social justice work in secular spaces and in our temple community, a congregation for whom spirituality and social justice are inextricably entwined. And I have shared with them that, just as it was during my youth, "discriminatory sex-role differentiation is a major organizing principle of our society" (Bartky, 1990, p. 18). It is a system in which "gender roles and relations in which women, and traits and activities still stereotypically associated with women such as nonviolence and caregiving, are subordinated and devalued" (Eisler, 2016, p. 1)—the Domination/Control model writ large upon my sons' childhoods, just as it was on mine.

Owing to these factors, my standpoint includes feminism, defined by Barbara Smith (1982) as a "political theory and practice to free *all* women: women of color, working-class women, poor women, physically challenged women, lesbians, old women, as well as white economically privileged white women" (p. 48). My standpoint also includes radical feminism, which "seeks to understand, address, and eventually eliminate the root [or radical] causes of social injustice and ecological unsustainability" (Jensen, 2007, p. 12), and also aims to free all women—as well as all boys and men. When we consider patriarchy's concomitant "connection with other systems of oppression—heterosexism, racism, class privilege, and histories of colonial and postcolonial domination" (Jensen, 2007, p. 29), filaments all comprising a web of Domination/Control oppression that continues to hurt *everyone*, we see that we need radical feminism, committed to addressing the root of the problem, to free everyone.

In this sense, as much as anything, I want my sons to know: under Domination systems, we *all* pay a price. Eisler (2011) writes, "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.” Similarly, bell hooks (2004) asserts that our boys’ emotional health is constantly besieged by such normalized, systemic violence: “Patriarchy as a system has denied males access to full emotional well-being, which is not the same as feeling rewarded, successful or powerful,” a critical distinction, for even one who “succeeds” at dominating loses (p. 31). Another critical point that hooks (2004) underscores is the necessity of highlighting “psychological patriarchy,” or patriarchy embedded in our psyches, a concept the understanding of which frees us from seeing *men* as the enemy but rather the system itself (p. 33). For, under patriarchy, all boys and men, like all girls and women, are ultimately “brutalized, victimized”—in short, denied their own humanity (hooks, 2004, p. 28).

These ideas I embrace provide ample impetus to teach my sons the precepts of Partnership and radical feminism, teachings that comprise, for me, part of a spiritual activist practice that is inseparable from mothering. Maparyan (2012) defines spiritual activism as “a social or ecological *transformational activity* rooted in a spiritual belief system or set of spiritual practices” (p. 119). For me, the “transformational” aspect emerges through the spontaneous, generative act of exchanging ideas from the heart, ideas that nudge us toward a greater understanding of our place in the web of the world. The “activity” manifests in the act of engaging in the conversation and storysharing, a spiritual, or sacred, practice unto itself, inasmuch as my sons and I, through storytelling and storyholding, create a sacrosanct space in which we can expand our capacity for and understanding of empathy and compassion. In this practice, we draw upon spiritual traditions, teachings, and concepts such as *tikkun olam* to contextualize our conversations and experiences, and locate them in the larger world. This foundational practice parallels the principles of Partnership, which emphasizes that intimate relationships and our relationship with ourselves are integral to transforming the world. Likewise, Partnership Parenting, based on respect and love

(Eisler, 2002, p. 43), not only increases a child's chances for optimal health, but it also "creates cross-generational internalized models of parenting" (Rando, 2016, p. 2), the kind of nurturance for self and others that flows "ever outward" (Carter & Saltee, 2015, p. 3), creating a ripple effect touching all our relationships, originating from an everyday sphere and subsequently suffusing the world we live in.

Like Partnership Parenting, spiritual activism, too, is rooted in the everyday sphere, with "diverse, improvisational, and heart-centered" tactics that "pervade everyday life" (Maparyan, 2012). This type of spiritual activism, or kitchen-table activism, is also foundational to what Maparyan (2012) calls the "Womanist Idea," the "means by which 'everyday' women, whether they work inside or outside the academy, transform 'everyday' settings and the political consciousnesses of 'everyday' people in line with a particular vision of human well-being, social justice, and commonweal" (p. 32) or "heart-centered intelligence that implicitly understands, and acts upon the knowledge of, how one's own life holistically integrates with the rest of creation, human or nonhuman" (p. 10). This understanding of interconnectedness echoes not only Barbara Smith's (1982) definition of feminism above, but also the Partnership Model, which values our relationships with all living beings, from self to community to nature and the environment. Maparyan (2012) also notes that the Womanist Idea has "grown beyond its original Black female base to include women, men, and even transpeople of other ethnic and cultural backgrounds from a variety of countries around the world" and is "a gift to the world from women of color" (pp. 32, 16).

## **STORYTELLING AS CARE WORK: DECENTERING THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE**

The care-work activism I endeavor to engage in as a feminist mother includes not only acknowledging such gifts as the Womanist Idea, but also naming those who have offered it and those who have offered similar gifts for navigating a spiritual approach to being, a practice that reflects the Partnership/Respect Model in action. For instance, when my sons bring to me questions about how to navigate situations they face—from the

conversation Zev overheard to my middle son's questions about the current cascade of #MeToo revelations to why it is that boys in my fifth-grader's class call each other "sissy" one moment, and "bro" the next—I not only engage in the practice of teaching them what I know from my own lived experience, and how many others have addressed and responded to similar situations, but who the activists are, be they individuals or collective groups, everyday or "official" people, thus decentering the dominant narrative and, by extension, dominant narrators. This is a practice modeled for me by my professors and cohort in the Women's Spirituality program at California Institute of Integral Studies, which integrates Partnership studies into its core curriculum, as well as in Liberation Spring, a grassroots adult freedom school in which I am a participant.

Hence, in my discussion with Zev about the conversation he overheard, I will ultimately name for him all of the thinkers and activists whose work I reference in this article, in order to honor the work that they have done and are doing, as well as to equip him with an idea of the vast range of different types of work, activism, and knowledge production people are engaging in; how each, like Partnership, values lived experience, including storytelling; and how to give credit where credit is due, and is so often overlooked or disregarded. In short, I aim to expose my sons to a multiplicity of points of view, continually decentering the dominant narrative and putting into effect not only Eisler's (2011) "story and spirit cornerstone", but also those of parent-child and of gender relations.

This type of decentering and naming, which recognizes, values, and honors the lived experience and praxis of feminized individuals and groups, is a key component of feminist activism and the Partnership Model, which values feminized work, including care work and social justice work (Eisler, 2008, p. 212). By extension, Partnership Parenting, rooted in caring, empathy, and love (Eisler, 2008), acknowledges that which has been rendered invisible, like countless women's experiences, under the Domination Model (p. 38). From caregivers to everyday caregiving and caregiving's status as work, the Partnership Model makes visible and values "feminine" work, such as caregiving in

the household, as critical for effecting meaningful social change (Eisler, 2008, p. 212). A move from the Domination/Control Model to the Partnership Model would recognize that “all social institutions—from the family, education, and religion to politics and economics—form a mutually supporting, interactive whole” (Eisler, 2008, p. 112). In my everyday experience as a woman and mother, Partnership aligns with the type of spiritual activism inherent in radical feminism, which aims to liberate all living beings, and in Maparyan’s (2012) commonweal, or the interactive whole, or web.

Taken together, these approaches reflect the Jewish idea of *tikkun olam*, defined by Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2005) as a “spiritual and mystical idea” that suggests that our acts “make a difference” and “rescue fragments of the divine light,” the Innate Divinity in all of us (p. 78). And, as with Partnership, radical feminism, and the Womanist Idea, *tikkun olam* is predicated upon not only repair of the world, but repair of self (*tikkun atzmi*) and of community (*tikkun kehilla*).

By drawing upon this plurality of approaches, enacting Partnership in my parenting, which makes my sons feel respected and that they, too, matter, (Rando, 2016, p. 8), I am teaching my sons to heal and to change the story, rather than to recapitulate the systems that hurt, the systems they run up against every day—manifest in media, in school curricula, in the news, in the air we breathe, in the cells and histories of our bodies—and in the conversations and stories we overhear. Including those in which one-half of humanity is deemed ever, and decidedly, “down there.”

## CHANGING THE MENTAL MAPS OF DOMINATION

*So, what do you think, Mom? Zev had asked me. Have you ever felt that way?*

He knew that in asking, he’d surely incite me to launch into a protracted mom discussion, using terms like *think-feel*, *interlocking systems of oppression*, and

*Partnership*, a discussion that would extend for much longer than he'd bargained for. But then he shut his notebook, signaling a genuine interest: he was eager to engage.

Before he could change his mind, I went ahead and shared exactly what I felt: equal parts grateful and aggrieved. The former, because he was bringing this conversation to the table and expressing compassion for his peers, connecting the dots between their lived experience and mine, and expressing empathy as he tried to make sense of where in all this *he* fit into the story. The latter, because his classmates were unwittingly highlighting a major point of the Domination/Control Model, or the systemic commodification of women's bodies: they were psychically projecting, upon their physical selves, a mirror of women's station in the Domination/Control hierarchy. In other words, in denoting their vaginas and their potential capacity to give birth as *below*, in locating their bodies and their reproductive power *beneath*, they were metaphorically mapping upon their external, corporeal bodies a palpable visual of where heteropatriarchy places women, revealing their internalized oppression and how they already valued themselves, *vis à vis androcracy*—which is to say, as objects, and without agency, a suppressed, age-old story spanning millennia, the history Eisler tells in *The Chalice and the Blade* (1987). Tracing the shift from a Partnership to Domination Model, Eisler illuminates how violence is *not* naturally inherent in the human species, despite what today's "bro" culture might have us think—about "real" men's "normal" predilection for "objectifying women, harassment, assault, homophobia," and, presumably, for unstretched-out vaginas (Homayoun, 2017, p. 1).

I also went ahead and talked with Zev about how, essentially, "down there" encompassed a comprehensive snapshot of just how patriarchy, ever made worse by white supremacy, wreaks a very specific sort damage on women and girls, precisely *because* they are female. In addition, I suggested that by engaging in discussions such as these, we were actively learning and putting into practice tenets of Partnership, which not only aims to "change cultural beliefs that the male half of humanity is entitled to control the female half in families and societies" (Eisler, 2002, p. 221), but

also seeks to “help change mental maps of domination as normal by unlinking masculinity from domination and violence, and femininity from subordination and obedience” (p. 217). Not only that, but we were examining our relationship with our own selves in the process, tending to our Partnership with self, critical to fostering empathy for ourselves and one another, the antithesis of the Domination Model, which would have us believe that the single defining aspect of men is their capacity for violence, and that the value of women, from all social locations, corresponds solely with what they possess “down there.”

“Down there,” of course, wasn’t just about the physical body. It was about spirit, too. In my own experience, childbirth was transformative. It had allowed me to tap into an ineffable dimension that I can only call divine. Not all women experience sexuality and childbirth in this way, of course; a host of factors affect this, from one’s bodily and reproductive sovereignty to social location and more. But what profoundly struck me about the young girls’ fears was this: that the Domination Model effectively severs people from their very body-spirit, their creatrix capacity, and from various access points to the divine. By framing their genitals and the act of their potentially giving birth as presumably detrimental to their value as sexual objects, and by marginalizing childbirth and the physical-spiritual power of their bodies, the young girls had, through no fault of their own, subconsciously ceded to the system a potentially transcendent moment and moments they might someday experience, turning the lens away from themselves, and the children they might give birth to, and training it squarely on men.

What these girls were experiencing, in other words, was a *specific* sort of shame—around childbirth, presumably some years off; around their bodies, with which they were already at war; around their intimate partner relationships, which had already taught them their worth lay solely in their genitalia, and conditionally at that. It was both surprising and not, to hear their disconsolateness concerning childbirth, the body, and intimate relationships, all of which can offer such profoundly joyful and transformative communion and love, and access to the Innate Divinity Maparyan

addresses. Yet in their focus on their vaginas as material objects to be consumed, and as the focal point of their existences, they belied their belief that they were unlovable by men unless they were sexualized solely for consumption. And even then, the so-called love would be ever and impossibly qualified, and predicated upon a host of splits, including body from spirit, body parts from the body itself, and even psyche from soul, their own self-love predicated on another's warped expression of love, ultimately damaging their Partnership with themselves. This dis-ease Zev's peers directed expressly toward their genitalia (and by extension, self and spirit) was a pointed reification and internalization of a codified, cultural misogyny, of masculinity as always better than femininity—in short, the patriarchal masculinity “embedded in [all] our psyches” (hooks, 2004, p. 32). In other words, it is normalized, a form of violence unto itself, which is unsustainable—for everyone.

In a recent interview with Riane Eisler, Charlotte Bunch (2016) urges that “Making violence against women and girls unacceptable requires changes in family and community attitudes toward violators in their midst as well as willingness to challenge cultural and religious authorities who cover up it up” (p. 5). By extension, we need to keep talking about and sharing stories about what this unacceptable violence does to boys and men. This makes me wonder: How much of the Domination Model have my sons already absorbed?

### **STORY AND SPIRIT AS ANTITOXIN FOR “MANLY” MEN**

Robert Jensen (2007) writes that under our culture's dominant conception of masculinity, or what it means to be a man, “No one is ever safe, and everyone loses something” (p. 27). Such systems, he contends, are not only “anti-human” but also “toxic,” inasmuch as they mandate that “real men” define themselves through the “struggle for control, conquest, and domination” (Jensen, 2007, pp. 26-27). In other words, sexist violence includes conditioning boys and men to become so-called manly men, upholding the Domination Model. For instance, “real” males are expected not to



engage in feminized work, such as care work, or feminized feeling, such as tenderness, nor are they expected to engage in only loving sexual relationships. This type of conditioning, mandated by patriarchal norms, aims to instill in males the belief that the only emotions they should express are anger and rage, which denies them access to their full range of emotions, and thus their humanity. It also aims to instill in males uncompromising constraints on their sexuality, with whom they express it, and how they gender-identify. Domination culture enforces this by upholding a code of silence. From pressure on both boys and girls to keep quiet about sexual harassment and abuse, to primary school textbooks that exclude women's stories and glorify hierarchies of control, a cultural code of silence refuses to name patriarchy, denying "everyone easy access even to the word" (hooks, 2004, pp. 24-25). In turn, this silence, or intentional concealment of actuality, promotes denial and even more violence—a dog chasing its tail.

I have repeatedly witnessed this phenomenon in my sons' lives. From the nursery school sandbox, where, during the toddler years, their playmates first began to inform them that boys don't cry, to the middle school lunch yard, where they're regularly informed that childcare is "women's work," to the high school halls, where Zev recently overheard his peers denigrate their femaleness, I know that my kids are, on a daily basis, being schooled in the Domination Model, with vast, punishing proscriptions for both boys and girls, a seemingly insurmountable, and joyless, state of affairs. Yet, as humans, Eisler argues (2004), we have an innate capacity for joy and for play, and Partnership relations acknowledge that such capacities "enable us to grow mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, which is true for individuals, families, and whole societies. Conflict is an opportunity to learn and to be creative, and power is exercised in ways that empower rather than disempower others" (p. xv).

Opportunity to learn and to be creative sounds a whole lot better than having to defend, through exhausting feats of relentless violence, a station that is ultimately generative of even more violence, which hooks (2004) aptly calls "psychic slaughter" (p. 66). For

being a manly man, as defined in our dominant society today can never mean winning. Rather, it's a nihilistic race toward joylessness—currently, and tragically, exemplified by the ever-increasing number of mass shootings committed by men who are realizing the apogee of extreme *androcracy*, or death—which, quite literally, is no way to live.

At this point in the conversation, Zev and I had touched upon the systemic commodification of women's bodies, including their labor and childbirth, as under the control of men—physically, economically, socially, the capitalistic iteration of the Domination/Control Model, which in turns denies boys and men access to their own humanity—a system that promotes, all told, a form of insanity. We'd discussed how the educational system, in many ways, accomplishes the inverse of cultivating precepts of the Partnership Model, be it in sex education or literature, both of which continue to omit entire swaths of truth in history, from refusing to name facts about genocide, slavery, or patriarchy in primary resources and lessons. We'd talked about bros, guns, and death. We'd even talked about how we were actively putting the Partnership Model to work by engaging in this conversation, which was a form of *tikkun atzmi*, or repair of the self, speaking our truths—and disrupting the Domination narrative with stories of our own.

### **PARTNERSHIP PRACTICE: BREAKING THE SILENCE WITH STORY**

In a recent article about the #MeToo movement, Rebecca Solnit (2017) writes, “Ignorance is one form of tolerance, whether it's pretending we're in a colorblind society or one in which misogyny is some quaint old thing we've gotten over” (p. 1). To be sure, such an ignorance/tolerance paradigm has been underscored time again. It has been underscored in institutionalized erasures in academia, in place names, in collective consciousness, in the persistent privileging of specific knowledge systems over others, of “fact” over lived experience. It is underscored by Zev's classmates' conversation, and their erasure of the word vagina, itself an erasure that mirrors dominant culture's view toward all “others.”

This erasure, painfully articulated for me in that first women's studies class years ago, drove home the fact that in a system where everyone's either dominating or dominated, no one stands to win. Be they young women reviling their bodies, seemingly longing for erasure in a system in which they can never be seen as fully human, as living beings, or be they my sons, bearing witness to and empathizing with their female counterparts' pain while examining their own role in the dialectic. It is my hope that, by weaving Partnership practices into my parenting, I will challenge such erasures, and that in so doing I might provide my sons with the tools they need to actively oppose and refute ignorance and violence, and instead promote healing and care.

“One needs a spirit of truth to resist,” writes Mercy Amba Oduyoye (1996, p. 166), and Partnership Parenting, built upon respect and love, necessarily depends on such a spirit of truth, and upon naming and sharing our truths. Some of the truths I tell my sons are these: *Androcracy* is a system of violence and control. *Androcracy* is a system of violence and control that is already thoroughly embedded in them. *Androcracy* is a system of violence and control that touches every human being.

Yet here is another truth I share: *Androcracy* is a system of violence and control that, *because* we are human, with a capacity for empathy, compassion, and love, I believe we can one day fully unlearn and subvert. Like so many have before us, we've begun to do just that: unlearn and subvert, resisting in the spirit of truth. Which is all the more reason to keep speaking our stories and to keep seating Partnership at our kitchen tables—and in every aspect of our lives.

## **PARTNERSHIP PARENTING TOOLKIT**

When practicing Partnership Parenting, it is helpful to keep in mind the power of story and spirit, a cornerstone of building cultures of Partnership and peace. Through sharing our stories, and by speaking accurately and honestly, we enact a Partnership-based relationship with our children, generating trust and, in turn, expanding our capacity for

empathy, tapping into spirit and compassion. In the acts of storytelling and storyholding, predicated upon deep listening, we foster a profound form of intimacy, modeling for our children how to practice the Partnership Model in close relationships, and, by extension, in spheres outside the home. By explicitly naming for our children the harmful systems we live in, such as patriarchy, we disrupt the Domination/Control Model. By the same token, by explicitly naming for children a range of models, concepts, and disciplines that intersect with and reflect Partnership, such as Women's Spirituality, radical feminism, womanism, and *tikkun olam*, we enhance our children's Partnership toolkit with a host of practical approaches for enacting, embodying, and promoting ways to care for self, community, and the world. Vital to this care work of listening to and exchanging stories is actively providing our children with a chorus of counter narratives challenging the Domination Model, especially the voices of those whose stories have been suppressed by the interrelated systems of misogyny and *androcracy*. Eisler (2011) writes, "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," (p. 1). Taken together, a multiplicity of stories, our own and others', and from diverse social locations, ultimately furthers the cultural shift to the Partnership Model, which does not rank one half of humanity over the other, but rather values the spirit, story, and divinity in all.

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