

Cultural Motherhood: Nurturing Human Maturation as a Way of Life

Liz Carr-Harris, was a woman I knew slightly. She spent a lot of time homesteading in the wilderness in northern BC, and she spent most of her time up there reading. She had a master's degree in experimental psychology, but her strongest interests became archaeology and evolutionary science. Around 2002 she started writing a book based on all she had read and absorbed, and that book just came out. It's called *The Descent of Religion: Its evolution from nurturing to bullying...and back!*

Unfortunately, Liz died a few months ago and never got to see her book in print. My partner volunteered me to Liz's partner, as a proofreader for the book, so I had to read every word. I thought it would be a chore, but it was gripping!

She writes a story that started hundreds of millions of years ago with unicellular life - some of which evolved into something more complicated. And the more complicated a life form got, the more problems it had to try to solve. And the more it solved problems, the more complicated the organism got and then the more new problems it needed to solve, in order to survive, and to reproduce and to continue.

One of the first really major complications was the division into two sexes; and the next wrinkle on that was an unequal division of labour between the sexes. By the time some life forms developed gestation in a maternal womb, the females were starting to need some help just to eat and be safe during a vulnerable time, so social grouping became really important.

Well, having so much family around to coordinate meant there had to be some communication between members of the group, and furthermore some ways of keeping behaviours on the useful side. And the more learning these organisms needed to continue to live, the more brain development they needed.

Well, once the brains reached a certain size, it became impossible for a female to give birth to a fully-developed organism; and thus, infancy and childhood started to be a solution, and to also cause their own problems.

I won't spoil the story by telling you how patriarchy came to be invented and take over the gifts from highly developed matrifocal and child-oriented societies. But I will tell you that Liz-Carr-Harris was convinced, based on humans' whole evolutionary experience, that patriarchy is an aberration that's against our nature, and so it really cannot last. I found that very refreshing!

But, back to the problem of the increasingly slow maturation of the life form that we now call homo sapiens – or, the new preferred term, homo donans. [smile] We don't just pop out of the womb like kittens, ready in a few months to begin assuming adult roles. We have really big brains that require a lot of software development – and I mean, really soft – maybe we should call it “squishy ware.”

What do we do with all that squishy ware? We learn. And as we learn, we create structures and understandings, we lay down pathways for future activities and future thoughts. As the great playwright Carolyn Gage says in one of her Lesbian Tent Revival sermons, when our human synapses get activated, then “What fires together, wires together.” We have experiences, both physical and virtual, and we learn.

Anyone who has ever spent time with an infant learns pretty quickly that learning is the most powerful human drive.

There's a fabulous short novel by the American author Tillie Olsen, it's called *Yonnondio: From the Thirties*. It's a record of life under crushing poverty – but on the last page, the baby stands up at the table and triumphantly demonstrates its learning: “I can do!”

This isn't memorized learning. It's learning about how to interact with the environment, how to use oneself, how to understand action and reaction, and how to make things happen. There are so many places you can go with a will to learn like that.

My mother is a music teacher. She is 85 years old, and still teaching music, because she loves the process of teaching people how to use themselves – their voices, their breath, their fingers, their energy and their minds – in a process that both allows them to be expressive and embeds them in a culture of cooperation, precision, persistence, listening, pleasure-giving, and respect. She doesn't think it's any less rewarding to teach an elderly woman with Parkinson's how to sing without quavering than to teach musical theatre techniques to a budding young star. What she loves most is not their perfection, but their growth. It makes her very happy to see the successful experience of music carry over into other parts of their lives.

I visited my mother for a long time at the end of May. She is newly widowed, but she does have many friendships and many projects in the community, mostly around music. She still marvels that she never succeeded in interesting me in studying music; but what I did learn from her is the recognition, and some of the skill, of doing cultural mothering.

Cultural Mothering is done in all kinds of settings. I get to do it at the campus and community radio station where I show people how to use radio to explore their communities and the world, and how to deal lovingly with others and share their enthusiasms with others. My partner and other women do it as frontline workers at the rape relief and women's shelter. They listen intelligently and compassionately; they offer knowledge about options and often material help; sometimes they say, “All right; but let this be the worst day of your life; I know you will find the strength in yourself not to be crushed by this, and to move on.”

Often cultural mothering is something done just in passing. You throw a toonie in a busker's violin case and you make the OK sign with your fingers and smile. You share valuable informative links with your friends on Facebook . [pause for laughter]. You strike up a respectful conversation with someone on a bus whom other people are ignoring or looking askance at, and get them to enjoying experiencing themselves again as an interesting and knowledgeable person, while the people around change their idea of what they see.

You do this stuff all the time; you wouldn't be here at this session if you didn't, I think.

This is the daily stuff of the gift economy: consciously and unconsciously, we are teaching each other. And, making use of what *we've* been taught - by learning, growing, and maturing. We apply ourselves to the good of our community and environment, through Cultural Motherhood.

Is this enough?

It is possible to teach, or let us say to inculcate, ideas and experiences that are harmful. The pride and joy of a young soldier learning to kill people can be badly misplaced. The pseudo-learning of a lot of mass entertainment will do little or nothing for the survival of community. Bad attitudes of the uncomfortable, selfish and unfulfilled do proliferate and reproduce themselves.

But Cultural Mothering is offering *genuine gifts*. As Genevieve Vaughan says, it's only a gift if the receiver can use it. When you get a gift that you can receive with your body, your spirit, and your way of life, that is a gift that will keep on giving. Cultural Mothering is constructive love. It's in our DNA. It's what we evolved for. It's the basis of our survival and our joy. What we're up against is not as strong as that!