

Hope for Going Beyond the Predator/Prey Dynamic

By Barbara Rona

A volcano erupted in my consciousness the other day when, quietly sitting in a comfy chair in my favorite bookstore, I read a Rebecca Solnit sentence within her book of essays, Whose Story Is This? I haven't slept much since.

The seismic shifts of consciousness brought about by our work together on internal oppression in Seeing Red undoubtedly set the stage for the eruption, but it took me by surprise just the same. The sentence was short: "Being groomed to be a predator dehumanizes you, as does being groomed to be a prey."¹ And then she followed up with what needs to happen: "We need a denormalization of all that so we can rehumanize ourselves."²

A denormalization of "all that," she says. So just what is "all that" – what are the particulars? I'd like to slide away from "all that," to tell the truth – but she's given me such a visceral archetypal image to describe how we function as males and females in patriarchy: as predators and prey! And that vivid image, that dyad is shaking and shaking me in my depths....

Of course, resistance rises up when I try to approach "all that": hasn't she given us a rather extreme archetypal image, an extreme ordering principle to describe the unconscious dynamic between males and females? Predator and prey...Aren't we more civilized than that?

And then I read in Brit Marling's New York Times article "I Don't Want to Be the Strong Female Lead" statistics that are so terrible they're hard to remember, to integrate: "Close to four women a day are murdered in America at the hands of their partners or former partners."³ That's four – of our sisters – here in our country, so they're our neighbors – who are killed dead, taken to the morgue – every day, like today – because a male they took in close and trusted did that....

Admittedly, this seems to indicate that the predator-prey dynamic is at work in the unconscious, too often denied, too often not inspected and broken apart.

Further, from the Times article: "One out of every four women in America has been the victim of a rape."⁴ And I remember Solnit's words: men are "groomed" to be predators – good at it, admired for it; and women are "groomed" to be prey – good at it, admired for it.

That helps me to understand why women's showing skin has always been an issue – and in most societies encouraged: if a woman (at the unconscious level) has been under the sway of the predator-prey dynamic – and her assigned role is to be the prey - then why not play her role well, play it to the hilt? Why not flaunt bare skin? It's risky, to be sure. But that's what a predator wants. Better give it to him, or at least look like you will, look like a tasty morsel to rip into....

¹ Rebecca Solnit, *Whose Story Is This?* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2019), 84.

² Solnit, *Whose Story*, 84.

³ Brit Marling, "I Don't Want to be the Strong Female Lead," *New York Times*, February 7, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/07/opinion/sunday/brit-marling-women-movies.html>.

⁴ Marling, "I Don't."

And I understand better my enjoyment of being in the company of just women, if I want to reflect deeply on women's issues (and many other issues): if the archetypal image of the predator/prey dyad is at work in me, with me as the prey and males as predators – and I haven't fully brought this to consciousness and worked with it (and I surely have a long ways to go) – I'm apt to function as a prey when males are present, being appeasing, angry, or whatever my prey-style is. In any case, I will be, from my depths, flooded with fear, as any prey in the presence of a predator is. And, as the saying goes, I'm apt to be "scared out of my wits," with fear tying down my wits, bodily and mentally. I do understand that the challenge of being with males in group discussions can be interesting. However, I'm around males often in my regular life; and the space and safety that a just-female group gives me, especially on my unconscious level, is precious, for it allows my depth work to open up as never before.

So, how might we begin to vision life for us all when we are "re-humanized" – feeling, thinking, speaking, dancing outside of the predator/prey dyad?

Many are celebrating the arrival of the Strong Female on the Hollywood screen. But in the Times article, Brit Marling shares her reservations, pointing out that in the Hollywood roles she has played, she has been asked not to break out of the predator/prey dyad, but just to shift places within that dyad: "[I]t would be hard to deny that there is nutrition to be drawn from any narrative that gives women agency and voice in a world where they are most often without both. But the more I acted the Strong Female Lead, the more I became aware of the narrow specificity of the characters' strengths – physical prowess, linear ambition, focused rationality. Masculine modalities of power...I don't want to be the dead girl. But I don't want to be a strong female lead either, if my power is defined largely by violence and domination, conquest and colonization...[They are just saying] give me a man but in the body of a woman I still want to see naked...."⁵

So, yes, there is hope when Hollywood doles out strong lead roles to females, but we have further to go! Where else, then, can we find hope that we can actually go beyond the pernicious predator/prey dynamic?

I find great hope when I listen to and reflect deeply on many others' – and sometimes my own – awakening to the fact that notions that have helped to keep us in the grip of the predator/prey dynamic regarding its harmlessness, pleasurableness, and naturalness, and our helplessness to escape it are not unassailable truths, but merely flimsy falsehoods.

Where's the Harm? This is Fun!

Solnit herself explodes the falsehood that enacting the patriarchal male/female dynamic is harmless, even fun, by boldly naming it the "predator/prey" dynamic – hardly a pretty wrapping of it. Thus, she obliges us to ask uncomfortable, transformative questions, which open the way for our taming our participation in the dynamic. A male, for example, is obliged to bring up embarrassing self-queries like: what are my favorite predator-styles and when do I use them – whether the Me Tarzan/You Jane come-ons, or the more "benevolent" I'll-Save-You moves? And a female is obliged to face embarrassing self-queries like: what are my favorite prey-styles and when do I use them – whether the Look-at-Gorgeous-Me or the more "innocent" disappearing act that signals You-Are-Such-An-Amazing-Hunk/Genius (or Whatever)?

⁵ Marling, "I Don't."

Further, she compels us to notice – and feel the heart-breaking cruelty of – our frequently crushing into non-existence boys' vulnerability and compassion, so evident when they are young, by systematically shaming them as "sissies" when they show anything but the non-stop tough, aggressive qualities of a predator. And she forces us to face what a loss it is when young girls are systematically shamed and ostracized as "not feminine enough" when they exhibit qualities not associated with a terrified "prey," like boldness and creative genius of any kind. Surely, the full spectrum of qualities from both males and females is needed for each human to enjoy wholeness and for the entire planet to survive and flourish.

But isn't the predator/prey game most often just flirtatious play? That's surely perfectly harmless – and great fun! I certainly thought so! Every Friday night, after a hard week, the medical interns and their partners, my first husband and I amongst them, would gather for a party, where one of the great enjoyments was flirting. Why not?

Then, one day, Donna, a female friend of mine, suddenly announced to me, "I've decided to stop flirting." I was stunned! Indeed it came as such a shock that my casual attitude about flirting dropped to the floor and I was left with the unavoidable question: "What have I been doing???" And uncomfortable reflections followed: "I'm in a committed relationship, so why do I want to draw some random guy toward me? I have nothing to offer him, really. And I don't even know much about his context: if he's married, how's it going? If not so great – well, marriages are hard enough without me, an outsider, trying to capture his interest – and perhaps succeeding. (It's not too tough to do.) What good would that do for me, for him, his wife, his children...?"

Suddenly the topic of flirting had become – and remains – not something to be approached mindlessly within the gotcha domain of predator and prey, but something to be approached mindfully, within the domain of love, where I and all others are treated as humans, with our full context to be honored. And when flirting gets a green light in that domain – well then, let the jubilant, delicious male/female frolic begin!

It's in our Nature!

Isn't it "natural" - and therefore inevitable - that the male/female relationship should be a predator/prey one? After all, in the species from which we've evolved isn't the sexual relationship between male and female quite reliably one of a large male, with his penetrating penis, dominating and overcoming the smaller, weaker female, with her like-it-or-not receiving uterus? So, what can we expect? It's all in the natural scheme of things!

The trouble is, this is a flimsy falsehood too, that evolutionary biologist Olivia Judson has a grand time demolishing, along with scores of other myths about the "natural order," in her hilarious, erudite book, *Dr. Tatiana's Sex Advice to All Creation*. There, she poses as Dr. Tatiana, who answers questions of the lovelorn. For example, one writes, "Dear Dr. Tatiana, There's been a frightful accident. I was happily sitting in my usual spot at the bottom of the sea when I felt an itch on my nose. Being a green spoon worm, I don't have arms and I couldn't scratch. So I sniffed. And I inhaled my husband. I've tried sneezing, but he hasn't reappeared. Is there anything I can do to get him back?"⁶

⁶ Olivia Judson, *Dr. Tatiana's Sex Advice to All Creation* (New York: Henry Holt, 2002), 199-200.

Dr. Tatiana replies, "There, there, it's no use crying over snuffed husbands. He wanted to be snuffed and he's not coming back." Then, she goes on to explain to the distraught green spoon worm how her husband happily took up residence in her "androecium – literally, 'small man's room' – where he can sit and fertilize passing eggs." And she adds, "The little chap is 200,000 times smaller than you."⁷

Her scientific report, then, does not exactly offer a firm foundation for arguing that our male ancestors were large and dominating and the females small and weak – and so, evolutionarily speaking, males have an excuse for being aggressive predators of females. They can't help it! The urge is built in! And, lest we think that the green spoon worm is an anomaly, Dr. Tatiana continues with more examples of "Lilliputian lovers appear [in] in widely separate groups."⁸

Further, to make things worse (for those who like order), she says, "In the seahorse, it's the female who has the penis, to deliver eggs into the male's brood pouch."⁹

In summary, she offers a poem that ends:

When it comes to the topic of gender,
Mother Nature's been having some fun.
Take nothing for granted! Remember,
You won't find any rules, not a one!¹⁰

Happily Helpless?

However, whether or not it's passed down to us through our biology, aren't we utterly helpless to escape the pull of enacting again and again the predator/prey scenario: Me Tarzan/You Jane? Besides, it's so romantic: "Some enchanted evening, you will see a stranger across a crowded room" – and you'll fly to his side and be swept into his arms! Who could resist? Who would want to?

But just how romantic is it, you might ask, if it's your beloved, not you, who's flying across the room into the arms of some complete stranger?

With that perspective, it's hopeful news that some are discovering not only that it's a falsehood that participating in the predator/prey dynamic is guaranteed to be harmless and fun, but also that it's a falsehood that doing so is beyond our control – that we are utterly helpless when we encounter a "certain kind of man," with predator qualities we've been groomed to find alluring, or a "certain kind of woman," with prey qualities we've been groomed to find irresistible.

In such a case, Carl Jung and others have helpfully advised us to discover what we've projected onto a male or female and to do the inner work that it takes to claim this as our own, so that we don't feel driven to chase in another what we've delegated to the shadow lands in ourselves. And it can be worth the work, even though it can take a while, to recognize what's been projected as having always been "at home" within us, and to be claimed as such.

⁷ Judson, *Dr. Tatiana's*, 200.

⁸ Judson, *Dr. Tatiana's*, 203.

⁹ Judson, *Dr. Tatiana's*, 209.

¹⁰ Judson, *Dr. Tatiana's*, 211.

For example, for the longest time I loved the 1966 hit by the Doors "Come On, Baby, Light My Fire!" It was everything a rock song should be – strong, lusty, energizing. And I could happily identify with the singer: I wanted someone to "light my fire" - no doubt about it! For this female, just as I had been groomed, this meant turning to men who had their inner fire blazing and a certain predator look about them.

Then one day, an insight broke through. I suddenly felt with indignation: "Wait a minute! I'm not going to sing to anyone 'Come on, Baby, light my fire.' No way! My Fire is already burning brightly within me, thank you very much! And I'm going to share it with whom – and when – I choose!" A sense of power surged through me – and has remained.

I understood then, too, that any dude who approached me with a "Come on, Baby, light my fire" attitude was not a strong dude, with me a "loser," if I couldn't deliver. Having projected his inner fire out onto women (as I had onto men), he was seemingly helplessly looking for "the one" who could momentarily spark his inner fire and endlessly keep it burning. No thank you! That would mean my going through endless gyrations – looking, acting, being "just right" to spark and keep lit someone else's inner fire. (A familiar female Sisyphean task.) How about I, in possession of and exuding my own inner fire, and another, in possession of and exuding his, get together and dance a dance of joy? (Should I be surprised that my husband of 42 years, with whom I have an ongoing affectionate, passionate, exuberant marriage, courted me to Carl Maria von Weber's "Invitation to the Dance"?)

Maya Angelou, in her poem "Phenomenal Woman," seems the epitome of a female in full possession of her passion and personhood. Even in the presence of men, she's not triggered into the predator/prey dynamic, but glides and struts about without the telltale fright or fury of a prey, or the projection of threatening predator onto the males who surround her. Instead, she's well acquainted with and grounded in her own "inner mystery."¹¹

Vitally Important Now

My favorite definition of feminism is that it's the radical notion that a female is a human being. But isn't that already recognized worldwide? Is Rebecca Solnit's call to rehumanize ourselves, to go beyond the predator/prey dynamic between males and female, actually important now?

President Jimmy Carter, who has visited 145 countries with Rosalynn, his wife, and has projects in more than one-half of these, wrote [A Call to Action](#) on the subject of female oppression worldwide. There, he declares the struggle for women's rights to be "the human and civil rights struggle of our time."¹² This is no naïve, ill-informed man speaking. He backs up his words with statistics and stories revealing violence against women in the form of genocide (femicide), rape, slavery, and economic, religious, and political discrimination worldwide. All of these forms of violence, it can be argued, are based on the predator/prey dynamic.

HOPE

However, is there real hope for us to go beyond this lethal dynamic? Calling out flimsy falsehoods masquerading as rock-solid truths, as we've done here, is one particularly potent way of undermining

¹¹ Maya Angelou, *And Still I Rise* (Random House, Inc., 1978).

¹² Jimmy Carter, *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 5.

the dynamic, for our inner life is upstream to our outer activism. This means that the quality of what enters and takes hold in our mind determines the quality of our downstream behavior.

Will this and other ways of undoing our stuckness in the predator/prey dynamic be enough, though? Do we dare to have hope for our future? Jerome Groopman M.D. of Harvard Medical School recounts in *The Anatomy of Hope* his very personal story of evolving from being paralyzed by his fear of giving his patients "false hope" to a very different attitude toward hope itself. Indeed, in the final chapter, "Lessons Learned," he shares his hard-won conclusions: "Each disease is uncertain in its outcome, and in that uncertainty, we find our real hope, because...a treatment can have an unexpectedly dramatic impact. This is the paradox of true hope: Because nothing is absolutely determined, there is not only reason to fear, but also reason to hope. And so we must find ways to bridle fear and give greater rein to hope."¹³ And then he continues, "[W]e are just beginning to appreciate hope's reach and have not defined its limits. I see hope as the very heart of healing."¹⁴

Hope, then, is a choice, a life-giving choice. It's not always an easy one; but Nobel laureate Pablo Neruda beseeches each of us to ask ourselves:

What's to be accomplished unless
I bear a part of hope on
My shoulders?
What's to be accomplished unless
I march on, bearing the banner that,
From hand to hand
In the long file of our
Great struggle, has passed
Into my hands?¹⁵

¹³ Jerome Groopman M.D., *The Anatomy of Hope* (Random House, Inc., 2004), 210-211.

¹⁴ Groopman, *The Anatomy*, 212.

¹⁵ Pablo Neruda, *Cuando de Chile* (Santiago, Chile: Austral, 1952). Quoted by David Krieger and Daisaku Ikeda, *Choose Hope: Your Role in Waging Peace in the Nuclear Age* (Santa Monica: Middleway Press, 2002), 179.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION – BARBARA RONA

Crucibles for transformative learning:

- Cornell University Philosophy Department, studying Wittgenstein's *Investigations* with Norman Malcolm and logic with Max Black and Henrik von Wright;
- 25 year practice as a psychotherapist;
- Marriage, motherhood, Quakerism, Tibetan Buddhism, editing Buddhist books for Robert Thurman and Thubten Chodron, participating in *Seeing Red* guided by Loralee Scott – with each of these situations effecting development of compassion and wisdom.