

On "Pleasure" & "Rhythm": Quotations from Sumner and Keller

"...much of the race's time has been devoted to producing rhythm and experiencing its interesting effects. Men like to play with it."

Long before Marilyn French's "Beyond Power" (1984) pointed to pleasure as the only liberating force that could not be controlled by the patriarchal, capital-accumulating powers bent on curtailing our freedoms, two of the early social scientists, William Graham Sumner (1840-1910) and Albert Galloway Keller, in their four volume *Science of Society* (1929), made the same point, albeit as part of an argument for the inevitability of patriarchy.

In one of the final chapters of their big volume on family and kinship, "Transition to the Patriarchate" they sum up: "Plainly the matriarchate could not make and consolidate conquests or support slavery, for its regulative power was insufficiently strong, durable, and consolidated. Under the strict mother-family there is no real organization. Its presence was one of the correlated factors which prevented the Iroquois Confederacy from becoming a real state. Division of function is present, but it is imperfect and there is no sufficient cooperation on the large scale; rather is it family-wise." (Vol 3, pg.1996)

Today it is easier to see the evil in conquest, slavery, "real organization," "a real state," a perfect division of labor, "cooperation on the large scale" and today we yearn for the "family-wise" way of doing things. We can also see very clearly, that far from being a necessity, these "fundamental" institutions we have developed are a calamity, an ecocatastrophe to be exact, and that the most important "institution" is missing – a contemporary equivalent of African *ngoma*, Australian *corroborree*, Ancient Greek *dithyramb* or *dromenon*, our natural rather than supernatural religion.

After a chapter on "Relationships and Family Life" and a "Retrospective" arguing that the evolution of society is neither "good" nor "bad" in the eyes of neutral (I would say 'dismal') scientists, they add two chapters almost as post scripts to the much larger study – "Pleasure" and "Ostentation and Prestige" – before the final chapter of "Generalities." And here is what they say about "The Element of Pleasure."

"Behind the evolution of the institutions previously considered in this book has lain the impulse of iron necessity. About the primordial interests that impel to societal self-maintenance and self-perpetuation there have gathered blocks of mores out of which the taboo has wrought the institutions of industry, war, property, government, and marriage; and fear of the supernatural has impelled to the development of religion. These are the fundamental institutions of society which men have been coerced to form. They are all expedients for insuring life against starvation, violence, and other menacing and destructive elements. It is through them that society continues its existence. They are adjustments to the inevitable conditions of life.

They do not, however, include the whole of human activity. There is yet another and more positive interest which has appeared over and over, though incidentally, in

preceding chapters. The race has not been engrossed in the evasion of ill to the exclusion of positive outreachings after self-gratification. It has not been always at a tension in the struggle for existence; the spur of necessity has not always been dug deep into its flanks; there has nearly always been some leisure that could be spent in doing what men wanted to do instead of only what they must do.”

“It is a fact that men strive no less to get pleasure than to attain the more fundamental things;” What Sumner and Keller didn’t know is that more recent and very careful studies have established that in hunting and gathering societies men and women average just an hour or two a day of what we would call work (Sahlins) or “the more fundamental things”; and they do not have to “strive” to get pleasure, they just hang out and enjoy 23 hours a day, or 16 if someone would rather sleep. It is also a fact, that in the many pages of the Sumner and Keller summa, or life’s work, they give whole, thick volumes to what they take to be “the evasion of ill,” and “the institutions of industry, war, property, government and marriage . . . which men have been coerced to form” and only a few concluding paragraphs to “pleasure” and our born to groove focus, “rhythm.”

Please note once again, before we turn to what these early scientists of society have to say about rhythm, that the contemporary feminist proposal of moving from power politics to pleasure politics is prefigured in the formal sequence and content of the Sumner/Keller volumes. If we see the Sumner/Keller overall presentation of social evolution as actually devolution, an increasingly coerced loss of human potential, a coerced loss of human creativity, a coerced loss of human freedom, a coerced loss of human capacity for sustainable and pleasurable living, then this paragraph on “Rhythm” becomes a revelation.

“Rhythm. The allied arts of poetry, music, and dancing have exercised considerable influence upon societal development. Mere language, by gesture or the spoken word, is a practical instrument belonging in the first instance to self-maintenance; and mere sound by itself signifies little; what transforms both of them into gratification-elements is really rhythm, whether it be perceived through the ear or through the eye. The nervous structure of man is such that rhythm exercises a powerful influence upon him. Rhythmical sound pleases and even evokes or stimulates rhythmical motion; of the Saoras it is reported that “music has great effect on them, and seems to compel them to give vent to the emotional excitement it creates in rhythmic motion.” Effort is rendered less arduous if it is put forth in a tempo set by sound. The big racing canoes of Borneo are paddled in rhythm with the beating of an experienced director. African carriers always get along better if they are allowed to accompany and assist their marching by chants and songs. The function of rhythm in military evolutions is better known than is its connection with various forms of labor. Rhythmic sound or motion can even induce hypnosis. To sentiments expressed in meter are added an elevation, impressiveness, lightness, abandon, tenderness, or ferocity which common means of expression do not convey. Rhythm and tone can create states of mind, as instrumental music, unaccompanied by words, has often demonstrated. These are strange and unaccountable phenomena but that they occur is a commonplace. People like to feel them; and much of the race’s time has been devoted to producing rhythm and experiencing its interesting effects. Men like to play with it.”

I love this paragraph on “Rhythm” because each sentence reminds us of some elementary truths about the forest even as the writers stop to hug individual trees. “Men like to play with it.”

Here is the Sumnerian last word on “**Pleasure**” from page 2111 (that's right, 2110 pages on the devolution into patriarchal power structures bring us to. . .)
“The professions of poet, musician, dancer, and playwright have disengaged themselves and a certain institutional character has been diffused somewhat vaguely over the theater and its connections.

When one looks in perspective at the proverbs, tale-telling, and other means of self-gratification, realizing that the proverbs and maxims in action, when set in a dramatic story, sink into the memory and win a zest that no philosophy can give; that the taboo is doubly effective when impressed by weighty authority and enforced by a tale of calamity; that the myths may be actually, in a sense, creative, and truer than history by virtue of the fact that they are experience generalized – he observes that the usages of self-gratification discharge a function over and above mere entertainment. They shape, formulate, and crystallize the folkways, delineate the code, give definite statement to standards, specify what is right and proper, differentiating so that it can be remembered between what should be done under certain circumstances and what should not. Ceremonial in general discharges a function covering these desirables. Much of ceremonial is, in part at least, entertainment; but that type which is, to appearance, much more frivolous than the religious variety – than such a serious rite as that of initiation, for example – yet attains the same results from a slightly or totally different angle. It renders standards tangible, understandable, unforgettable.”

In other words, if we want to make the revolutionary change to “pleasure politics” and make the new standards tangible, understandable and unforgettable, then “the professions of poet, musician, dancer and playwright” must be reintegrated and fused in life-affirming ceremonial.

Where better to do this than in Kindergarten and first grade!

Pat Campbell:

Kids need “hang time”, opportunities to just “be.” They are often over-indulged in the organized play their families have set up for them, because that is thought to be the thing to do these days. They are rushed off to soccer practice, piano lessons, scouts, martial arts sessions, swim team meets, sometimes engaging every day of the week in these after-school activities. These children have little time to play freely, to explore, to invent – unless they’re managing “on the sly”, enroute with friends to games, or in the locker room, or perhaps on the hiking and camping outings for which scouts are known.

William Wells Newell worried over this loss of childhood, too, and predicted in 1883 that the final flowering of childsong was underway. He worried then, way before electronic media, that children already had less opportunity to learn, to preserve, and to transmit a lore all their own, away from adult supervision. Without “hang time,” children would never experience the richest rituals of childhood, and would never learn the chants,

rhymes, riddles, and games passed down orally through the generations from children to other children.

Yet somehow, children's songs continued into the next century, and they continue even now. True, they may have dropped in frequency in some settings. They may also have been replaced in some instances by other musical behaviors such as children's "rhythmic" — rhythmic movements, rhythmic tapping and slapping (on desks, chairs, floors, tabletops, books, and other ready-made surfaces), and rhythmic rapping of speech and other vocal sputters and splatters when mouths imitate boomboxes, samplers and synthesizers of studio made music. But some children still sing the songs of children growing up generations ago: "My Sailor Went to Sea, Sea, Sea", "Eeny Meeny Miney Moe", and "Little Miss Muffet", wicked parodies based on "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star", "The Battle Hymn of the Republic (Glory, Glory Hallelujah)", and "We Three Kinds of Orient Are".

Before we worry too hard about the loss of children's lore, we need to listen and pay our deepest respects to whatever has survived in synch. Concurrently, a little more slack time for children can't hurt either.

- What music are children making all on their own? What continuities are in their repertoire, and what's brand new and original? Where do they make their music, and why? Answers to these and other questions can be found in Jonroar Bjorkvald's The Muse Within: Creativity and Communication, Song and Play from Childhood through Maturity (New York: Harper Collins, 1992) and Songs in Their Heads (Patricia Shehan Campbell, New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
- For superb examples of children's lore, including childsongs, see Opie, Iona, and Peter Opie, 1985, The Singing Game. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Knapp, M. and H. Knapp, 1976, One Potato, two Potato: The Secret Education of American Children. New York: Norton; and Jones, Bessie and Bess Lomax Hawes, Step It Down: Games, Plays, Songs and Stories from the Afro-American Heritage. New York: Harper & Row.