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SEX AND THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

This question arose in my mind for no apparent reason; and I found myself answering - "Reproduction". That brought me up with a jolt. "Rubbish" I said to myself. Reproduction existed long before sex -cells multiplied and divided and still do. So why sexual reproduction? I thought of the double helix. Of the D.N.A. molecules and the chromosomes For what purpose this marvellous intertwining and interacting?

Surely to produce a new creature slightly different from either parent. Without sex change is slow. Daughter cell is just like mother cell, and evolution takes millions of years. But with the coming of sex the pace hots up. Change occurs between generations as well as during them and the possibilities for evolutionary growth are enhanced. So it would appear that the purpose of sex is to speed up evolution.

The nuclear family has taken a lot of knocks recently for the emotional damage it does to children by placing them in an intense relationship with only two adults. However in the light of my reflections in the previous paragraphs perhaps this issue could be looked at from another point of view. How do we evolve at an emotional level? Is it not precisely the depth of feeling associated with intense relationships that provides the motivation for change? We loved, and were not loved in return. Or we were loved in a way that cramped us in and dit not satisfy our needs. "You said you loved me but all you wanted was somebody to satisfy **your** needs" we cry to our parents. This stress and discomfort - the sense that life could be better leads us as adults to seek relief from our hang- ups in relating to others, to working on our selves to create change. I believe that the evolution of consciousness is the purpose of life on earth. Unfortunately most human beings tend to prefer stasis to evolution. None of us welcomes stasis in our bowels, but most of us gladly suffer constipation at an emotional and mental level. We prefer our present response patterns, ideas, views of life to change which is hard work and often painful. So we have to be prodded into working on it, and it is the stress and discomfort that provides much of the prodding. I remember Gerda Boyesen saying once that we should look at our hang-ups in a positive light, love them for the protection they had given us when we needed to carry on with living. However I would go further and say that we should love our hang-ups because they are the basis of our motivation for change; for fulfilling our function as human beings. No doubt if we take up this task willingly, the need for the goad to prod us will

cease, but I for one am certainly still a long way from taking full responsibility for my own contribution to the evolutionary process, and feel my hang-ups are necessary to push me on!

The nuclear family therefore has an important role to play in evolution by providing the stimulus for self exploration and change. At the present time it seems to have a specially important part to play in the development of the consciousness of adult women, whose place in the world is particularly dubious and insecure. At first sight this may seem a strange point of view - have we not acquired the vote, equal pay, laws against sexual discrimination - the position of women is stronger than it has ever been. Yes, but it is stronger in the sense that women now have more opportunity to do the things men do, and while this is undoubtedly a good thing in itself I feel it has had an undermining effect on our feeling of security in ourselves as women. If we look back at the early stages of human evolution and consider the hunter/gatherer communities, we see that the situation of women was quite different. Women generally carried out tasks which were not the same as those of men, but research seems to have established that their gathering activities were just as important to the survival of the community as the men's hunting. In other words male and female were equally balanced in their economic importance. The growth of farming and civilization gradually changed this position. With the cultivation of plants and herding of animals ownership became important, and a man's possessions tended to be regarded as including his wife and children. However women often still had the satisfaction of engaging in occupations vital to the life of the community. How tasks were split between the sexes varied from one and to another, but in most cases women's work remained important. They might not, with their responsibility for children, be able to herd or plough, but if they spun, wove sewed skins, or made tents, these things too had become necessary for the survival of human beings.

In later times the preparation and preservation of food at least was in the hands of women, and even in my early childhood in the late 1930s I remember my mother's role as being essential for comfort if not for survival, with washing by hand, coal fires which made sweeping and dusting a daily necessity, grates to blacklead, steps to scrub or polish, fruit to be bottled and preserved for winter.

This base of self value has gradually been eroded by the industrial revolution. Spinning, weaving, garment making became an industrial activity organised by men. Food preservation too was taken over by the factories, and finally even the personal comfort side of women's work ceased to be important. Central heating, carpeting, washing machines, packaged food, all make it possible to do a full time job and carry out domestic tasks as well.

Women have therefore lost their economic importance to the community, and the only way they can regain it, and the sense of participation and self-value which goes with it, is to move out into the world of industry, commerce and government. But this world is a world created by men for men. Moreover it was created at a time when the wives of men in managerial positions remained at home. Consequently it was organised to meet this situation, with fixed working hours, separation of home and business, loyalty to the organisation etc. This situation creates problems for women. To start with we rejoiced when it became possible to choose to follow a career as an alternative to marriage. But most women now want both. Men can have a job and a family, why should women have to choose between them as alternatives? It is difficult - the working world is inflexible in its requirements and makes no provision for the fluctuations in a family's need for care. In addition, if one wants a career rather than just a job, further problems arise as the degree of commitment expected increases. I was in the civil service for 20 years, and was initially quite satisfied with the way women were treated, but when I was promoted to a middle management grade post, I looked around and found myself the only woman in the division. On reflection it was not difficult to see why; we were paid on the basis that we would work overtime if necessary. This meant that I arrived at the office in the morning not knowing whether I should get away at 5.45 p.m. or, if something urgent came up, or an M.P. had tabled a question, some hours later. This did not happen very often, but the fact that it was liable to happen made organisation of my life difficult. I remember Lord Hailsham saying once when being interviewed that although he was very fond of his family, the public service came first where time was concerned. This created a conflict in me which still remains. On the one hand dedication to public service seems admirable as opposed to the pursuit of purely personal interest, but on the other hand does the nation have the right to require its servants to put the office before the home, and if so, how do women fit into this scheme? This cannot surely be a problem peculiar to the civil service. Organisations of all types tend to demand a loyalty which puts the organisation first if one is to make a successful career. These conflicts are particularly relevant to women, and force us to consider the relationships between the individual, the family and society. If we lived in communes, we could probably evade these problems since some women could care for the children while others followed careers.

The nuclear family forces many married women to deal with their painful situation in some way, or at the least to become aware of it. It therefore acts as a catalyst for change. I therefore see the nuclear family in a positive light as a form of social organisation which helps to speed up the evolution of human beings, just as sexual reproduction increases the speed of evolution of all species which have attained it.