



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Transform a scream into a song

Rachel Mackintosh © 13 March 2022

What do you see when I show you this image?



Who do you see?

Do you project yourself on to this person?

Yes?

I don't. I see a neutral person, not me.

Could it be a woman? Hard to imagine.

I see a man.

Could he be Māori? Doesn't even occur to me.

Could he be disabled? Clearly doesn't need a wheelchair, and invisible disabilities don't enter my view.

Could it be a non-binary person?

What?

Is this person old?

No.

This is just a normal, average person.

A young white able-bodied man, that is. Did I not mention cisgender and heterosexual? Goes without saying.

Normal.

I grew up in the 1970s; raised by a feminist; encouraged to believe that girls could do anything, that sexism was a scourge, that women could and must seek liberation from patriarchy. I also went to school, where we learned about the post-WW II migration, when people immigrated to New Zealand from Britain, bringing their wives and children with them. Where, if some rather light chairs needed moving, the teacher would always ask for two strong boys.

I am biased. I see a white man in the orange voter person.

How are you doing?

Our opening poem tells how an empowered girl is a hurricane who can paint the world in sunsets.

It's a powerful image about girls reaching their potential. Let's make it happen.

What do we know about our potential?

We may love Aretha Franklin's "You make me feel like a natural woman" – I do; it feels so uplifting. It soars like a woman reaching her potential.

What is the potential of a natural woman?

Well, we think ("girls can do anything" notwithstanding), probably different from the potential of a natural man. And if we don't think it, we probably feel it.

When we are at primary school, early maths and language teaching involves learning about opposites: black–white, up–down, inside–outside, big–small, thick–thin ... and most especially, boy–girl.

When we hear about a new baby, what's the first thing most of us want to know? Is it a boy or a girl?

Why do we “need” to know? Because our binary biases are so deep-rooted. Because the child hasn’t learned anything much yet and so the only thing we have is their “nature”.

Lucy Cooke is a British zoologist who is a good authority on what is natural for females. She has written a book called *Bitch: A Revolutionary Guide to Sex, Evolution & the Female Animal*. The quotes below are from from a Guardian article by Emma Beddington that reviews the book and interviews the author:-
“The zoologist sticking her neck out in the battle of the sexes”.

Why do I mention this today? Because in 2022, the union movement of which I am part takes the opportunity of International Working Women’s Day to note that we are seeking Decent Work for all workers in Aotearoa New Zealand. As an ingredient of Decent Work, we seek to eliminate violence and harassment, particularly gender-based violence and harassment, from the world of work. In this quest, it is helpful to know what we are dealing with, and what are the possibilities for change.

Cooke’s view is that we look at nature uncritically *“through a Victorian pinhole camera,”* that has given those who wish to preserve patriarchy a foundation *“to claim that a host of grim male behaviours — from rape to compulsive skirt-chasing to male supremacy — [are] only natural for humans because Darwin [says] so.”*

Darwin has had a lot of help in having his pinhole cemented into our psyches, including from Richard Dawkins. Cooke was taught by Richard Dawkins and explains:

“The female is exploited, and the fundamental evolutionary basis for the exploitation is the fact that eggs are larger than sperms,’ wrote my college tutor Richard Dawkins in his bestselling evolutionary bible, The Selfish Gene.

“According to zoological law, we egg-makers had been betrayed by our bulky gametes. By investing our genetic legacy in a few nutrient-rich ova, rather than millions of mobile sperm, our forebears had pulled the short straw in the primeval lottery of life. Now we were doomed to play second fiddle to the sperm-shooters for all eternity; a feminine footnote to the macho main event.

“I was taught that this apparently trivial disparity in our sex cells laid cast-iron biological foundations for sexual inequality. ‘It is possible to interpret all other

differences between the sexes as stemming from this one basic difference,' Dawkins told us. 'Female exploitation begins here.'

"Male animals led swashbuckling lives of thrusting agency. They fought one another over leadership or possession of females. They shagged around indiscriminately, propelled by a biological imperative to spread their seed far and wide. And they were socially dominant; where males led, females meekly followed. A female's role was as selfless mother, naturally; as such, maternal efforts were deemed all alike: we had zero competitive edge."

I don't know about you, but I have heard of Richard Dawkins, but not of Lucy Cooke.

Cooke's science breaks with this pinhole camera view. She has observed nature and can tell us that *"[f]emale animals are just as promiscuous, competitive, aggressive, dominant and dynamic as males."*

Here is a sample of what can be observed in nature if the Darwinian scales have fallen from our eyes (from the Guardian article* by Emma Beddington that reviews the book and interviews the author):

"[S]potted hyenas have eight-inch clitorises which get erections and female moles have 'ovo-testes', albatrosses can form lasting lesbian partnerships, all-female whiptail lizards reproduce asexually but engage in gender-fluid role play, and ducks have spiral-shaped vaginas, probably to evade forced copulation ... you'll never look at your local duckpond in the same way, especially once you read the indelible phrase 'The penis explodes out of his cloaca at 75mph, unfurling itself... like some kind of sinewy party hooter.'"

So, we see that nature is endlessly various.

But wait, there's more: Cooke takes us beyond the binary, when she explains the thing that took her most by surprise in her scientific research:

"The fact that the genes that make an ovary or testes, the things that drive you down the male or female pathway, are basically the same genes, just playing a different tune. I couldn't believe it. This idea of male and female being these distinct genetic entities is complete rubbish. As a species we're fascinated by dichotomies, we want everything to be black and white, but it just doesn't work like that. When it comes to sex, anything goes."

There is literally no scientific basis for the bias, the sexism and the violence that are rife in our society.

I have spoken to this congregation before about the [International Labour Organisation's Convention 190](#), an international law that creates the right for all people to be free from violence and harassment. Convention 190 recognises the issue as combining human rights, health and safety, and the unequal power relations in our society — particularly gender-based power relations. Anisa Nandaula, in the [“break the bias” poem we heard at the beginning of the service](#), says, *“Bias is a wall that justifies someone laying their hands on their partner ... It doesn't start with a fist. It starts with an idea.”*

The convention recognises the force of ideas in power relations, and is geared towards creating the cultural change necessary for a truly safe world of work. One part of the framework is the requirement for education. Every conversation we have can contribute to this. If you have had a nagging feeling that you have tried to squelch, telling you that, really, men are just more aggressive than women, because Darwin, because Dawkins, because my son prefers trucks, it's just true ... then perhaps the new science of Lucy Cooke has given you pause. And you can be part of change, creating a safe world for women and all genders.

Let us all reach our potential. Let's eliminate violence and harassment so that we may transform our screams into songs.

Meditation / Conversation starter:

How does the world not recognize your full potential?

How might you reach it anyway?

How may we work together so that everyone can reach their potential?