

## Love in Infant Monkeys

**H**arry Harlow had a general hypothesis and he would refine and prove it: that mothers are useful, developmentally. That they have an intrinsic value beyond their breast milk. Call this value, for lack of a better concept, their company.

He was bucking the trend in American psychology, where for decades prominent experts on parenting had been advising mothers to show their children as little affection as possible. Too much affection was coddling, and coddling weakened a child. “When you are tempted to pet your child,” said a president of the American Psychological Association in a speech, “remember that mother love is a dangerous instrument.” This school of thought ran counter to the grain of history—counter to what was believed by those not indebted for their child-rearing strategies to a rigorously monitored testing process. But it was dominant in the scholarship. To refute it, the value of love had to be demonstrated in a controlled experimental setting.

Harlow worked long hours, seldom leaving his laboratory. With his experiments he made a name for himself, appearing on television programs and traveling the country on speaking engagements. He was seen as a rebel and an iconoclast. He spoke boldly of mother love, calling it “contact comfort.” He stressed its value to emotional health.

And he was outspoken, which drew criticism from the faint of heart. He spoke harshly of his test subjects. “The only thing I care about is whether a monkey will turn out a property I can publish,” he said. “I don’t have any love for them. I never have. How could you love a monkey?” Another time he said, “I just have no feeling for them—at all.”

To know how love works a scientist must study hate. This is simple scientific method; Harry admitted it. The suffering of lesser beings was

the price of knowledge. As he put it, “If my work will save one million human children, I can’t get overly concerned about ten monkeys.”

Others were doing bold animal experiments at the same time, in the fifties, when Harry started, and on. Rats were dropped in boiling water, cats pinned down for months until their legs withered, dogs irradiated until their skin crisped, monkeys shot in the heads and stomachs, or immobilized to have spinal cords severed. When it came to the treatment of research animals, Harry was squarely in the mainstream. It was his willingness to speak bluntly that brought him notice.

He gathered disciples around him, young women and men who would continue his work, and decades later he would still be revered by psychology. While acknowledging the problem of what some might call animal cruelty, later scholars would view his collateral damage as a necessary unpleasantness. His chief biographer, a woman journalist, described him as a “rose in a cornfield.”

He was a high-functioning alcoholic, and there were long periods in his life when he was rarely sober. He had wives, first one, then another, then the first one again. He had two sets of children he never saw.

Harry Frederick Harlow had been born Harry Frederick Israel. Around the time of his doctoral dissertation he had changed his last name, not because he was Jewish—for he was not, in fact, Jewish—but because the name “Israel” sounded Jewish and this made it hard to secure a good job. He did not dislike Jews; indeed, he admired them for their intelligence and their education, but others in academia had certain prejudices. A famous professor who was also his first mentor did not wish him to continue to be mistaken for a Jew, so Harry deferred to him.

It was a minor accommodation.

One way to prove his hypothesis was to take a newborn monkey away from its mother. And never give it back. Put it in a bare box, observe it. Anxiety first, shown in trembling and shaking; then come the screams. Watch it huddle, small limbs clutching. Make careful notations. Next, construct a wire mannequin that holds a milk bottle. See if the baby thinks the mannequin is its mother. When it does not think so, give it a mannequin draped with terrycloth, but no milk. See it cling to this milkless, cloth mannequin.

Repeat experiment with numerous infants. Make notations.

Second, place infant monkeys in isolation, with neither monkey

nor human contact save the sight of the researchers' hands entering the box to change bedding or food. Leave them there for thirty days. Make careful notations. When the infants are removed, watch two among them starve themselves till they expire. Notations. Repeat with longer isolation periods. First six months, then a year. If necessary, force-feed upon removal from box. Observe: if left in boxes for twelve months, infants will no longer move. Only life signs, pulse and respiration. Upon removal from box, such damaged infants may have to be re-isolated for the duration of their short lives. Notations.

Third, attempt to breed the isolate monkeys to produce needed new experimental subjects. When the monkeys show no inclination to mate, inseminate the females. Call device "the rape rack." Observe the birth of infants. Observe that the longest-isolated mothers kill infants by chewing off fingers and toes or crushing heads with their teeth. Notations.

Fourth, create bad mother surrogates: mothers with spikes, mothers that blast cold wind. Put baby monkeys on them. Observe: time after time, baby monkeys return. Bad mother is better than none.

Only eight p.m. and he was already slurring. He would swing by that party. What the hell. Suomi said he'd be there.

First, check the experiments. Walking along the row of vertical chambers he gave cursory glances inside—one, two, three subjects in a row had given up trying to climb out of their wells of isolation. The pits were designed, of course, to make it impossible to escape.

One subject scrambled and fell back, a weak young female. She looked up with her great round black eyes. Blink blink. She was afraid, but still plucky. Still game to try to get out, change her situation. The others were abject at the bottom of their separate holes, knew by now they could never climb the sides of the wells. As far as they knew they were in there for good. Plucky got you nowhere if you were a lab monkey.

Then the boxes where Bill had dosed the subjects with reserpine. These monkeys, too, huddled unmoving. Serotonin had been suppressed; this seemed to equate almost uniformly with complete listlessness, complete passivity. Might be other factors, but still: very interesting.

Back past the so-called pits of despair, where the young female—what had they named her? Minestrone?—was still trying to climb the walls and falling repeatedly. She squeaked at him. Well, not at him, technically. She did not know he was there; she could not see him. She could see no one. She was alone.

Harlow got in the car. Drove. Wasn't far. Hated faculty parties, hardly ever went to them: frivolous. Took him away from his work.

He told this to a new female grad student who met him on the walkway, exclaiming at his presence. She had long curly hair and wore no brassiere. A hippie.

“Dr. Harlow! I can't believe you actually made it!”

“Work allatime,” he said, nodding and shrugging at once. Not as easy as he thought it would be. Pulled it together. “Lucky. Always have smart wives to help me with it.”

She shot him a look of pity: everyone knew the second smart wife was on her cancer deathbed.

“Some of the faculty,” he went on, “these guys don't even work Sundays. Not serious.”

She was looking at him like he was a baby bird fallen from its nest. The free-love ones were maternal. Always acting like everyone's little mommy.

Save it up for the kiddies, he thought. Wasted on me.

These days, Peggy dying like this, maybe he should take a break more often—the depression, for one thing—felt like the top of his head was weighing him down. Headaches constantly. Chest squashed and nervous stomach. Nothing compared to the chemo, but still. Hair and skin greasy. Plus he was tired, face ached with it. Didn't know if he could have kept his head up if he stayed at his desk. Fell asleep with a cigarette in his mouth last night, woke up with a stack of papers smoldering. Something smelled wrong. Burned his eyebrow half off, it turned out.

He patted his pocket for his cigarettes. Full pack. His students were going to be here. Chance to talk to Steve again about the chambers. Steve had said not to call them *dungeons*. Bad for public opinion.

Bullshit, but Steve was good at that side of it. Spade a spade, goddammit.

Saw a garden hose sticking out of a spigot against the side of the house. Turned it on, with some difficulty. Wrestled with the hose till cool water spluttered into his mouth. Cleared his head. Tongue felt less mealy. He wiggled the tongue around in his mouth. Testing it.

“Harry!—I can't believe this—Harry!”

Fat woman from the department, what did she do? Personnel? Payroll? Lumbering.

“Ha, ha,” he said, dropping the hose, stepping up onto the stoop and lurching into the doorjamb.

“So you’re finally out of your cave! Look who’s here! It’s *Harry*! Can you guys believe this? Come on in!”

There was the good-looking girl from East Germany who was interested in the nuclear family experiments, smoking in the corner with Jim. Poor Jim, that plagiarism thing with Peggy. Unfair. But nothing he could do about it. Couldn’t get in the middle. He shrugged, itchy.

The jacket: how long had he been wearing it? Felt oily. Maybe it was the shirt. Was it supposed to be white? He could not remember. Gray, beige or white? What color was the shirt to begin with?

“Get you a highball, Harry?”

It was a hard-to-breathe night. Humid, filmy. He squinted. Could barely see the kids in the corner, but all of them seemed to be looking at him.

The fat payroll said something about gin. He nodded. Headache getting worse. Bands of light spanning his field of vision.

“Harry,” said a guy from the right. “Harry Harlow, right? Hey, I read ‘Love in Infant Monkeys.’ Great paper.”

“Huh,” grunted Harry. “Seen Suomi?”

“Steve’s not here yet,” said the guy, either frowning or leering. No idea who it was. Might be the chancellor, for all he knew. Wished he would disappear.

“Huh,” Harry muttered. Guy was already veering toward something out the side door, where a fountain was playing. A twinkle of water? Mermaids?

“Lie down a little,” he told the payroll woman, who hovered with a heavy tumbler. He accepted it gratefully, drank it down and gave it right back. Good to be prompt. Aftertaste was hinky. “Spare daybed, maybe? Dark room? Cot thing?”

“Certainly,” said the woman. “There, there. You poor dear.” She leaned close and whispered with obscene intimacy: “How’s she *doing*?”

Wasn’t a baby bird, for Chrissake. No broken wing. Piece of his mind; tell her straight she resembled a water buffalo. Should be roaming the Serengeti with her quadruped friends. “Holding up, holding up,” he mumbled. “Brave girl, Peggy.” Hadn’t seen her for more than five minutes since what, Tuesday? Busy. She knew; she understood perfectly.

He persevered to the room at the back. Secluded. The water buffalo showed him in. Closed the door in her face. “No buffaloes,” he said, quietly but firmly.

He fell down on the bed and felt a brief satisfaction.

When he woke the party was over. Brimming ashtrays everywhere. Skinny kid fast asleep on the couch, legs straight, sneakers splayed on the sofa arm. Harry stood over the kitchen sink, full of squeezed-out lemon halves and olives. He splashed water on his face and gargled out of a used glass. Didn't see a clean one. Who cared. His mouth was pure alcohol, would neutralize the germs. Made his way out of the bungalow, thirsty as hell. Needed something real to drink.

White light; he blinked on the stoop. It was early morning, Sunday? Legs felt heavy, but he would go to the lab. Still had a faint headache, but bearable now.

Lab was empty. Students must be sitting on their asses this weekend. Pure mediocrity.

Walking the gauntlet of the pits of despair he glanced into Minestrone's setup. Saw the top of her head. She was just sitting there. He kept watching; she did not move. Not a spark animated the creature. Finally given up. Now broken. Her spindly arms hung loose from the sockets, doing nothing. Hunched little figure, staring. Nothing there. It had gone.

Had a flask in a special file cabinet. Headed for it. Deep swig.

In the nightmare, which he'd had in other forms before, he stood beside his beautiful boxes, the boxes of his own design, the boxes that had been admired by B. F. Skinner himself. He mistook each infant monkey for a beloved soul. In that way the nightmare was confusing. He saw each infant in the heart of its mother, precious, unique, held so close because the mother was willing to die for it. The mother, in the dream, knew what he was doing as he took the infant from her. She was fully aware of what was happening, to her and her baby. It was as though she were being forced to watch the infant waste away, left alone in the box—not for the length of its life, perhaps, but for the length of its self, until the self flew out and was forever gone.

In the nightmare it was always the mother monkey he faced, not the infants. The mother with her wild, desperate eyes. He felt what he could only think of as her passion, like a heat emanating. The mother was crazy with love, mad with a singular devotion. All she wanted was the safety of her infant. She would chew off her feet for it. She would do anything.

But she was trapped, simply trapped. He had put her in a cage and the cage was too strong for her. When he took the baby from her arms,

her panic rose so high it could rise no higher; if she knew how to beg she would beg till the end of the world, scream until her throat split.

*Give me my baby back.*

He knew the feeling of loss that would last till she died. He knew it the way he knew a distant country. They had their own customs there.