

The GenderKnot
Unravelling Our Patriarchal
Legacy.

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Where Are We?

Twenty-five men and women gather for a workshop on gender issues in the workplace. In a simple opening exercise, they divide into small single-gender groups and brainstorm four lists: the advantages and disadvantages their own gender has in the workplace, and their perception of the advantages and disadvantages the other gender has. The women dive into the task with energy to spare that gets more intense as their lists of women's disadvantages and men's advantages spill over onto second and third flip-chart pages. Sometimes the energy comes out in waves of laughter that roll out into the room and wash up on the still quiet shore of the men's groups. At other times it's felt simply in women's furious scribbling of one item after another: paid less, held to higher or double standards, worked harder, granted little power or respect, judged on physical attractiveness more than performance or ability, confined by glass ceilings, not taken seriously, sexually harassed, given little support or mentoring, allowed little space or privacy, excluded from informal networks, patronized, expected to do "housekeeping" chores from taking notes to getting coffee, treated as weaker and less intelligent, often denied credit for ideas appropriated by men, and treated without recognition of the family roles that also claim their time and energy in a society that makes few such demands on men.

On it goes. The men work in tight-knit little groups on the fringes of the women's energy. Surprisingly for many, their lists are quite similar to the women's lists, if a bit shorter. Men miss many of the forms that advantages

and disadvantages take, but in a basic sense, they know very well what's going on. They know what they've got and what women don't. When the men are done, they stand and watch the women, still at work, in awkward silence. After a while each group shares what it's come up with. There is some good-natured if somewhat nervous laughter over the inevitable throw-away items: men don't have to wait in line to use the bathroom; men can get away with simpler and cheaper wardrobes. But there soon follows a steady stream of one undisputed fact after another about how gender shapes and limits the lives of women and men in the workplace and beyond. The accumulated sum hangs heavy in the air. There are flashes of anger from some of the women, but many don't seem to know what to do with how they feel. The men often just stand and listen, muted, as if they'd like to find a safe place to hide or a way to defend themselves, as if the lists were about them personally. In response to questions about how the lists make them feel, one man says that he wants to hang onto the advantages without being part of their negative consequences for women. "Depressed" is a frequent response from the women.

A silence falls over the room, and in the silence, two things become clear. The lists say something powerful and serious about people's lives. And we don't know how to talk about them. If we don't know how to talk about them, we certainly don't know what to do about them. The result is a kind of paralysis that hangs in the air. The paralysis reflects not only where this particular group—and many others like it—finds itself as it confronts the reality of gender inequality, but where entire societies are in relation to these issues. Where we are is stuck. Where we are is lost. Where we are is deep inside an oppressive gender legacy, faced with the knowledge that what gender is about is tied to a great deal of suffering, injustice, and trouble. But we don't know what to do with the knowledge or the trouble, and this binds us in a knot of fear, anger, blame, defensiveness, guilt, pain, denial, ambivalence, and confusion. We're unsure of just about everything except that something is wrong and we're in it up to our necks. The more we pull at the knot, the tighter it gets.

We're trapped inside a legacy, and its core is patriarchal. To understand it and take part in the journey out of it, we have to find ways to unravel the knot, and this begins with getting clear about what it means to be inside a patriarchal legacy. To get clear, we first have to get past the defensive reaction of many people—men in particular—to the word "patriarchy" itself, which they routinely interpret as a code word for "men." It will take an entire chapter (Chapter 4) to do justice to this issue, but I can give the gist of the answer right away: patriarchy is *not* simply another way of saying

"men." Patriarchy is a kind of society, and a society is more than a collection of people. As such, "patriarchy" doesn't refer to me or any other man or collection of men, but to a kind of society in which men *and* women participate. By itself this poses enough problems without the added burden of equating an entire society with one group of people.

What is patriarchy? A society is patriarchal to the degree that it is *male-dominated*, *male-identified*, and *male-centered*. It also involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women. Patriarchy is male-dominated in that positions of authority—political, economic, legal, religious, educational, military, domestic—are generally reserved for men. Heads of state, corporate CEOs and board members, religious leaders, school principals, members of legislatures at all levels of government, senior law partners, tenured full professors, generals and admirals, and even those identified as "head of household" all tend to be male under patriarchy. When a woman finds her way into such positions, people tend to be struck by the exception to the rule, and wonder how she'll measure up against a man in the same position. It's a test we rarely apply to men ("I wonder if he'll be as good a president as a woman would be") except, perhaps, on those rare occasions when men venture into the devalued domestic and other "caring" work most women do. Even then, men's failure to measure up can be interpreted as a sign of superiority, a trained incapacity that actually protects their privileged status ("You change the diaper, I'm no good at that sort of thing").

In the simplest sense, male dominance creates power differences between men and women. It means, for example, that men can claim larger shares of income and wealth. It means they can shape culture in ways that reflect and serve men's collective interests by, for example, controlling the content of films and television shows, passing laws that allow husbands to rape their wives, or adjudicating rape and sexual harassment cases in ways that put the victim rather than the defendant on trial. Male dominance also promotes the idea that men are superior to women. In part this occurs because we don't distinguish between the superiority of *positions* in a hierarchy and the kinds of people who usually occupy them.¹ This means that if superior positions are occupied by men, it's a short leap to the idea that *men* must be superior. If presidents, generals, legislators, priests, popes, and corporate CEOs are all men (with a few token women as exceptions to prove the rule), then men as a group become identified with superiority even though most men aren't powerful in their individual lives. In this sense, *every* man's standing in relation to women is enhanced by the male monopoly over authority in patriarchal societies.

Patriarchal societies are *male-identified* in that core cultural ideas about what is considered good, desirable, preferable, or normal are associated

with how we think about men and masculinity. The simplest example of this is the still widespread use of male pronouns and nouns to represent people in general. When we routinely refer to human beings as "man" or to doctors as "he," we construct a symbolic world in which men are in the foreground and women in the background, marginalized as outsiders and exceptions to the rule.² (This practice can back people into some embarrassingly ridiculous corners, as in the anthropology text that described man as a "species that breast-feeds his young.") But male identification amounts to much more than this, for it also takes men and men's lives as the standard for defining what is normal. The idea of a career, for example, with its 60-hour weeks, is defined in ways that assume the career-holder has something like a wife at home to perform the vital support work of taking care of children, doing laundry, and making sure there's a safe, clean, comfortable haven for rest and recuperation from the stress of the competitive male-dominated world. Since women generally don't have wives, they find it harder to identify with and prosper within this male-identified model.

Another aspect of male identification is the cultural description of masculinity and the ideal man in terms that closely resemble the core values of society as a whole. These include qualities such as control, strength, efficiency, competitiveness, toughness, coolness under pressure, logic, forcefulness, decisiveness, rationality, autonomy, self-sufficiency, and control over any emotion that interferes with other core values (such as invulnerability).³ These male-identified qualities are associated with the work valued most in most patriarchal societies—such as business, politics, war, athletics, law, and medicine—because this work has been organized in ways that require such qualities for success. In contrast, qualities such as inefficiency, cooperation, mutuality, equality, sharing, compassion, caring, vulnerability, a readiness to negotiate and compromise, emotional expressiveness, and intuitive and other nonlinear ways of thinking are all devalued and culturally associated with femininity and femaleness.

Of course, femaleness isn't devalued entirely. Women are often prized for their beauty as objects of male sexual desire, for example, but as such they are often possessed and controlled in ways that ultimately devalue them. There is also a powerful cultural romanticizing of women in general and mothers in particular, but it is a tightly focused sentimentality (as on Mother's Day or Secretaries' Day) that has little effect on how women are regarded and treated on a day-to-day basis. And, like all sentimentality, it doesn't have much weight when it comes to actually doing something to support women's lives by, for example, providing effective and affordable child day-care facilities for working mothers, or family leave policies that allow

working women to attend to the caring functions for which we supposedly value them so highly.

Because patriarchy is male-identified, when most women look out on the world they see themselves reflected as women in a few narrow areas of life such as "caring" occupations (teaching, nursing, child care) and personal relationships. To see herself as a leader, for example, a woman must first get around the fact that leadership itself has been gendered through its identification with maleness and masculinity as part of patriarchal culture. While a man might have to learn to see himself as a manager, a woman has to be able to see herself as a *woman* manager who can succeed in spite of the fact that she isn't a man. As a result, any woman who dares strive for standing in the world beyond the sphere of caring relationships must choose between two very different cultural images of who she is and ought to be. For her to assume real public power—as in politics, corporations, or her church—she must resolve a contradiction between her culturally based identity as a woman, on the one hand, and the male-identified *position* that she occupies on the other. For this reason, the more powerful a woman is under patriarchy, the more "unsexed" she becomes in the eyes of others as her female cultural identity recedes beneath the mantle of male-identified power and the masculine images associated with it. With men the effect is just the opposite: the more powerful they are, the more aware we are of their maleness. Power looks sexy on men but not on women.

But for all the pitfalls and limitations, some women do make it to positions of power. What about Margaret Thatcher, Queen Elizabeth I, Catherine the Great, Indira Gandhi, and Golda Meir? Doesn't their power contradict the idea that patriarchy is male-dominated? The answer is that patriarchy can accommodate a limited number of powerful women so long as the society retains its essential patriarchal character, especially in being male-identified.⁴ Although some individual women have wielded great power, it has always been in societies organized on a patriarchal model. Each woman was surrounded by powerful men—generals, cabinet ministers, bishops, and wealthy aristocrats or businessmen—whose collective interests she supported and without whom she could not have ruled as she did. And not one of these women could have achieved and held her position without embracing core patriarchal values. Indeed, part of what makes these women stand out as so exceptional is their ability to embody values culturally defined as masculine: they've been tougher, more decisive, more aggressive, more calculating, and more emotionally controlled than most men around them.⁵ These women's power, however, has nothing to do with whether women in general are subordinated under patriarchy. It also doesn't

mean that putting more women in positions of authority will by itself do much for women unless we also change the patriarchal character of the systems in which they operate. Indeed, without such change, the Margaret Thatchers of the world tend to affirm the very systems that subordinate women by fostering the illusion of gender equality and by embracing the patriarchal values on which male power and privilege rest.⁶

Since patriarchy identifies power with men, the vast majority of men who aren't powerful but are instead dominated by other men can still feel some connection with the *idea* of male dominance and with men who *are* powerful. It is far easier, for example, for an unemployed working-class man to identify with male leaders and their displays of patriarchal masculine toughness than it is for women of any class. When upper-class U.S. President George Bush "got tough" with Saddam Hussein, for example, men of all classes could identify with his acting out of basic patriarchal values. In this way, male identification gives even the most lowly placed man a cultural basis for feeling some sense of superiority over the otherwise most highly placed woman (which is why a construction worker can feel within his rights as a man when he sexually harasses a well-dressed professional woman who happens to walk by).⁷ Lina Wertmuller beautifully portrays this dynamic in her film, *Swept Away*, in which a working-class man is marooned on an island with an upper-class woman. Although disadvantaged by class, he's very aware of his right to sexually dominate any woman he chooses, which he uses to accomplish a temporary overthrow of her class privilege. Under patriarchy, this scenario would have little credibility or mainstream audience appeal if we reversed the situation and had a lower-class woman subdue and dominate an upper-class man. The objection is not based on social class but on its threat to the gender order that subordinates women. She wouldn't be seen as bold or heroic; rather, *he* would be judged for his lack of masculine power and control.

In addition to being male-dominated and male-identified, patriarchy is *male-centered*, which means that the focus of attention is primarily on men and what they do. Pick up any newspaper or go to any movie theater and you'll find stories primarily about men and what they've done or haven't done or what they have to say about either. With rare exceptions, women are portrayed as along for the ride, fussing over their support work of domestic labor and maintaining love relationships, providing something for men to fight over, or being foils that reflect or amplify men's heroic struggle with the human condition. If there's a crisis, what we see is what men did to create it and how men dealt with it.

If you want a story about heroism, moral courage, spiritual transforma-

tion, endurance, or any of the struggles that give human life its deepest meaning and significance, men and masculinity are usually the terms in which you must see it. (To see what I mean, make a list of the twenty most important movies you've ever seen and count how many focus on men as the central characters whose experience forms the point of the story.) Male experience is what patriarchal culture offers to represent *human* experience and the enduring themes of life, even when these are most often about women in the actual living of them. Films about single men taking care of children, for example, such as *Kramer vs. Kramer* and *Sleepless in Seattle*, have far more audience appeal than those focusing on women, even though women are much more likely to be single parents. And stories that focus on deep bonds of friendship—which men have a much tougher time forming than women do—are far more likely to focus on men than women.⁸ In the closing scenes of *Dances with Wolves*, for example, the white male hero and his Native American-raised wife leave his recently adopted tribe, which is also the only family she has known since early childhood. The focus, however, is clearly on the drama of *his* moment as she looks on supportively. *She* is leaving her adoptive parents, but we see only the emotionally charged parting (with a touching exchange of gifts) between son- and father-in-law. And the last words we hear are the deeply moving cries of a newfound warrior friend testifying to the depth of feeling between these two men (of which, oddly, this is the only expression we ever see). By contrast, films that focus on women, such as *Girlfriends*, *Leaving Normal*, *Passion Fish*, *Strangers in Good Company*, and *Thelma and Louise*, are such startling exceptions that they invariably sink quickly into obscurity, are dismissed as clones of male themes ("female buddy movies"), or are subjected to intense scrutiny as aberrations needing to be explained.

A male center of focus is everywhere. Research makes clear, for example, what most women probably already know: that men dominate conversations by talking more, interrupting more, and controlling content.⁹ When women suggest ideas in business meetings, they often go unnoticed until a man makes the same suggestion and receives credit for it (or, as a cartoon caption put it, "Excellent idea Ms. Jones. Perhaps one of the men would like to suggest it"). In classrooms at all levels of schooling, boys and men command center stage and receive the lion's share of attention.¹⁰ Even when women gather together, they must often resist the ongoing assumption that no situation can be complete or even entirely real unless a man is there to take the center position. How else do we understand the experience of groups of women who go out for drinks and conversation and are approached by men who ask, "Are you ladies alone?"

Many men, however, will protest that they don't *feel* at the center of things, and this is one of the many ironic consequences of patriarchal male privilege. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf wrote that women often serve as "looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size."¹¹ Woolf's insight suggests several things about what happens to men in patriarchal societies. As part of men's patriarchal training, they are affirmed through what they accomplish.¹² This contrasts with women, whose training mirrors them in different ways, affirming them less for what they accomplish than for their ability to empathize and mirror others as they form and maintain personal relationships. If men want to satisfy the human need to be seen and acknowledged by others, it will be through what they do and how well they live up to the standards of patriarchal manhood (which is one reason why male friendships tend to focus so heavily on competition and doing things together). This affects both individual men and patriarchy as a system, for men's focus on themselves ("See me!") and women's focus on others reinforce patriarchy's male-identified, male-centered aspects. These, in turn, support male dominance by making it easier for men to concentrate on enhancing and protecting their own status.

Another consequence of patriarchal mirroring is that heterosexual men in particular are encouraged to relate to women with the expectation of seeing only themselves. When men's reflection is obscured by the reality and demands of women's own lives, men are vulnerable to feeling left out and neglected. Like cold-blooded animals that generate little heat of their own, this dynamic makes it hard for men to feel warm unless the light is shining on them at the moment, something well-known to wives, who spend inordinate amounts of time worrying about whether they're paying enough attention to their husbands, about whether they should be sitting quietly and reading a book or spending time with women friends when they could be with the men in their lives. It is a worry few men wrestle with unless their wives complain.

All of this is compounded by the expectation that in order to feel normally alive men must be reflected as larger than life. This makes it difficult to develop an acceptable sense of themselves as ordinary human beings with a relatively stable center from which they can relate to other people. As a result, feeling themselves the focus of a one-way flow of attention is the closest that patriarchal training allows many men to come to authentic personal relationships. This shouldn't be confused with most of what passes for "male bonding." When men get together with other men, they typically are male-centered in the general sense of focusing attention on men and what men do. On an interpersonal level, however, men generally don't put other

men at the center of their attention because they are in competition with one another and because they are too busy looking for someone to put *them* at the center. As I've wrestled with the difficulty of forming friendships with other men, for example, it's both puzzled and pained me to realize how rarely it occurs to me to telephone a male friend simply to ask how he is, to place his life at the center of my attention at my own initiative. For many years I simply couldn't see the point to it. I was in the middle of one of many patriarchal paradoxes: that men live in a male-centered society and yet act as though the reality of other men's inner lives matters very little.

Although men generally don't provide one another with the kind of mirroring they expect from women, they do play a part in fostering the illusion of being larger than life, especially through competition. When men compete, they enter the pumped-up world of winners and losers, in which the number of times a ball goes through a hoop or is carried over a line elevates men over other men (and, by default, over all women) in ways judged to be important in patriarchal culture. If ever there was an assertion of larger-than-life status, the triumphant shout of "We're number one! We're number one!" is it. (Not asked is, For how long? Compared to whom? So what?) Even the losers and the male spectators share in the reflected glow of the noble masculine striving after the coveted opportunity to stand before the mirror that makes us look bigger than we are, if only for a little while—until the next season begins or someone faster, stronger, or younger comes along.

All of this, of course, is impossible for men to sustain. Women have distracting lives of their own in spite of their training to keep men at the center of their attention. And the fleeting moments of actually living up to the expectation of being larger than life are just that. As a result, patriarchal expectations that place men at the center paradoxically perch men just a short drop away from feeling that they aren't at the center and, therefore, on some level, that they don't exist at all.

Women and Patriarchy

At the heart of patriarchy is the oppression of women, which takes several forms. Historically, for example, women have been excluded from major institutions such as church, state, universities, and the professions. Even when they've been allowed to participate, it's generally been at subordinate, second-class levels. Marilyn French goes so far as to argue that historically women's oppression has amounted to a form of slavery:

(W)hat other term can one use to describe a state in which people do not have rights over their own bodies, their own sexuality, marriage, reproduction or divorce, in which they may not receive education or practice a trade or profession, or move about freely in the world? Many women (both past and present) work laboriously all their lives without receiving any payment for their work.¹³

Because patriarchy is male-identified and male-centered, women and the work they do tends to be devalued, if not made invisible. In their industrial capitalist form, for example, patriarchal cultures do not define the unpaid domestic work that women do as real work, and if women do something, it tends to be valued less than when men do it. As women's numbers in male-dominated occupations increase, the prestige and income that go with them tend to decline, a pattern found in a variety of occupations, from telephone operator and secretary to psychotherapist.¹⁴ Like many minorities, women are routinely repressed in their development as human beings through neglect and discrimination in schools¹⁵ and in occupational hiring, development, promotion, and rewards. Anyone who doubts that patriarchy is an oppressive system need only spend some time with the growing literature documenting not only economic, political, and other institutionalized sexism, but pervasive violence, from pornography to the everyday realities of wife battering, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.¹⁶

This is not to deny that much has changed in women's position over the last hundred years—from the appointment of Sandra Day O'Connor and Ruth Bader Ginsberg to the U.S. Supreme Court to assigning women to combat zones during the Persian Gulf War. There is less tolerance for overt sexist behavior toward women in many settings; an elite of women have managed to enter the professions and, to a degree, upper-middle levels of corporate management; and most laws that blatantly discriminate against women have been repealed. But to a great degree this highly publicized progress supports an illusion of fundamental change. In spite of new laws, for example, violence and sexual harassment against women are as pervasive as ever, if not more so; inequality of income and wealth has not changed much from the 1950s; and women are still heavily concentrated in a small number of low-level, pink-collar occupations. In spite of the huge influx of married women, many of them mothers, into the paid labor force, and in spite of a great deal of talk about the joys of fatherhood, there's been no substantial increase in men's sense of responsibility for domestic labor or their willingness to actually participate.¹⁷ And women's share of authority in major institutions—from the state to organized religion to corporations to sci-

ence, higher education, and the mass media—remains low.¹⁸ In short, the basic features that define patriarchy as a type of society have barely budged, and the women's movement has stalled in much the same way that the civil rights movement stalled after the hard-won gains of the 1960s.

Thus far, the mainstream women's movement has concentrated on the relatively less threatening aspects of the liberal agenda. The primary goal has been to allow women to do what men do in the ways that men do it, whether in science, the professions, business, or government. The more serious challenges to patriarchy have been silenced, maligned, and misunderstood for reasons that aren't hard to fathom. As difficult as it is to change overtly sexist sensibilities and behavior, it is much harder to raise critical questions about how sexism is embedded in major institutions such as the economy, politics, religion, and the family. It is easier to allow women to assimilate into patriarchal society than to question society itself. It is easier to allow a few women to occupy positions of authority and dominance than to question whether social life should be organized around principles of hierarchy, control, and dominance at all, to allow a few women to reach the heights of the corporate hierarchy rather than question whether people's needs should depend on an economic system based on dominance, control, and competition. It is easier to allow women to practice law than to question adversarial conflict as a model for resolving disputes and achieving justice. It has even been easier to admit women to military combat roles than to question the acceptability of warfare and its attendant images of patriarchal masculine power and heroism as instruments of national policy. And it has been easier to elevate and applaud a few women than to confront the cultural misogyny that is never far off, waiting in the wings and available for anyone who wants to use it to bring women down and put them in their place.

That the mainstream women's movement has focused on goals that are "relatively less threatening" doesn't mean any of this has been easy or anything close to it. Like all movements that work for basic change, women's movements have come up against the depth to which the status quo is embedded in virtually every major aspect of social life. The power of patriarchy is especially evident in the ongoing backlash against even the liberal agenda of women's movements—including the Supreme Court's retreat on abortion rights; the mistreatment of highly publicized victims of sexual harassment and assault such as Anita Hill; the widespread effort to discredit feminism, resulting in women's growing reluctance to embrace or identify with it; and the emergence of a vocal movement of men who portray themselves as victims not only of the sex/gender system but of women's struggle to free themselves from their own oppression under it.¹⁹

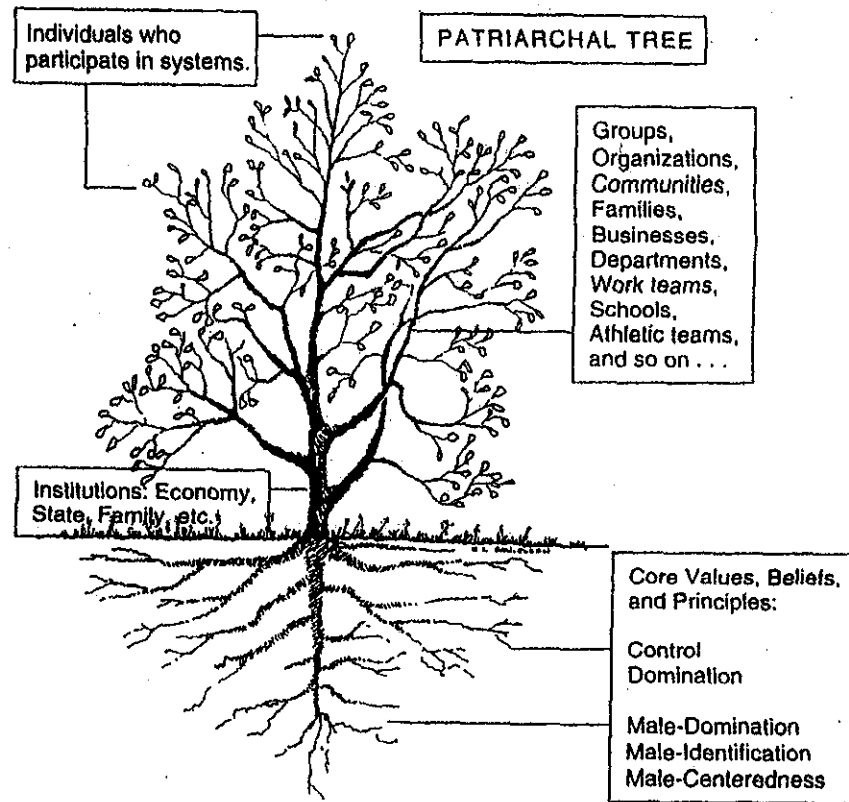
The power of patriarchy is also reflected in its ability to absorb the pressures of superficial change as a defense against deeper challenges. Every social system has a certain amount of "give" in it that allows some change to occur, and in the process leaves deep structures untouched and even invisible. Indeed, the "give" plays a critical part in maintaining the status quo by fostering illusions of fundamental change and acting as a systemic shock absorber. It keeps us focused on symptoms while root causes go unnoticed and unremarked; and it deflects the power we need to take the risky deeper journey that leads to the heart of patriarchy and our involvement in it.

Like all social systems, patriarchy is slow and difficult to change because it is complex and its roots run deep. It is like a tree rooted in core principles of control, competition, domination, and hierarchy.²⁰ Its trunk is the major institutional patterns of social life as shaped by the roots—family, economy, politics, religion, education, music and the arts. The branches—first the larger, then the progressively smaller—are the actual communities, organizations, groups, and other systems in which we live our lives, from cities and towns to corporations, parishes, marriages and families. And in all of this, individuals are the leaves who both make possible the life of the tree and draw their form and life from it.

Obviously, we're in something that's much larger than ourselves, that isn't us. But equally obvious is our profound connection to it through the social conditions that shape our sense of who we are and what kinds of alternatives we can choose from. As a system, patriarchy provides paths of least resistance that encourage men to accept gender privilege and perpetuate women's oppression, if only through silence. And its paths of least resistance encourage women to accept and adapt to their oppressed position even to the extent of undermining women's movements to bring about change. We can't avoid participating in patriarchy; it has been handed to us. But we can choose *how* to participate in it, how to relate to the paths of least resistance that patriarchy lays out for us, how to be not merely part of the problem, but also part of the solution.

Deep Structures and the Way Out

Over the last century or so a lot has happened around the subject of gender and patriarchy. There's been an enormous amount of feminist writing and social action in Western industrial societies, and for the first time the potential exists to challenge patriarchy in a serious and sustained way. Most people's attention is on the surface storms raging around particular issues such



Drawing by Esther L. Danielson.

as abortion, pornography, sexual harassment and violence, and political and economic discrimination. But these rarely if ever raise critical questions about the nature of patriarchy itself. In spite of the important feminist work being done on the patriarchal roots of pornography and violence against women, for example, public discussion rarely gets beyond issues of free speech, constitutional rights, and individual psychopathology.²¹ In part this is because we don't know how to get beyond such questions to explore the trunk and roots of patriarchal society, but it is also a way to avoid going deeper into our lives and the world that shapes them.

To go deeper we need both inner and outer awareness, which flow from different yet related kinds of insight. I've come to know the first as a client in psychotherapy, which more than anything else introduced me to the exis-

tence of deep structures inside each of us—webs of belief, experience, and feeling that help shape the patterns in our lives. They affect us so deeply in part because we aren't aware of them in a critical way. Most people, for example, have a strong personal sense of what it means to be a woman or a man, a sense that profoundly affects how they think, feel, and act. But rarely do we think about such ideas critically. Rarely do we explore alternatives or look closely at how they affect us. We're unaware because awareness is hard work (try to monitor your thoughts for just five minutes), and also because we're easily threatened by anything that questions our basic assumptions. As a result, we live as if these deep structures did not exist at all, as if life's surface that presents itself most immediately to us were all there is. This makes us least aware of aspects of our selves that most affect us, except, perhaps, when a crisis forces us to look deeper, to overcome our resistance simply because we feel we have no other choice. We're like spouses who confront the reality of how they actually experience each other only when their marriage is falling apart.

A second kind of insight is grounded in my work as a sociologist, through which I've been able to see a similar phenomenon at a larger level. As a matter of course, we go about our daily lives without any ongoing awareness of the deep underlying structures and shared understandings that define the social terms on which we live. It's as if the other leaves and small branches to which they cling are all there is to the patriarchal tree. To some degree, we're unaware of deeper social realities because we don't know *how* to be aware. We lack a clear working sense of what a society actually is, for example, or how to think about large systems like industrial capitalism, much less about how we're involved in them. In part, this is just a matter of training. Two hundred years ago, for example, psychology didn't exist, and barely a century ago Freud still hadn't come along to suggest the existence of the subconscious and offer his ideas on personality and the meaning of dreams. And yet today a basic psychological language for making sense of inner experience has become the stuff of everyday conversation and television talk shows. In a similar way, we need to incorporate into common usage ways of making sense of societies and our relation to them.

What is perhaps most important about the deep structures of individuals and societies is how closely they're connected to one another. It's easy to think, for example, that reality is just what we think it is, that a phenomenon like sexuality is a fixed, concrete "thing" that simply exists, waiting for us to discover and experience it. But as Michel Foucault has argued, our intensely personal experience of ourselves as sexual beings is profoundly shaped by the society we live in and the ways of thinking about sex that are

part of its culture.²² In a heterosexist culture, for example, when people say "sexual" they typically mean "heterosexual" and exclude all other forms of sexual expression as possible meanings. In ancient Greece, however, "sexual" included a much broader range of human potential and experience which, in turn, shaped people's perceptions and experience as sexual beings. And only a century or so ago in Europe and the United States, "homosexual" was a term that described behavior but not people: people could behave in homosexual ways, but this didn't make them "homosexuals." The word "homosexuality" first appeared in print in Germany in 1869 and was first used in *The New York Times* in 1926.²³ Today, by contrast, homosexuality is treated as an aberration at the core of people's social identities and an oppressive system that excludes and persecutes them.²⁴

Just what we think sexuality *is*, then, depends on which society we're participating in and extends to our most fundamental sense of who we are. "Female" and "male," for example, are in the simplest sense words that we use to categorize people. We tend to experience them as more than words, however, treating them as representing some fixed, objective reality. We act as though "sex" is a word that refers to just one thing, regardless of culture, and that it includes two and only two possible categories, male and female. But in fact, things don't divide themselves up so neatly. An estimated 2 to 3 percent of babies are born with physical characteristics that don't fall clearly into one sex category or another. A baby might be born genetically female, for example, with a "normal" vagina and a clitoris that has developed as a penis. In cultures that admit only two sexes, there's little tolerance for such ambiguity, and parents feel compelled to do something about it, from infanticide to surgically assigning one sex or the other to the newborn.²⁵

From this perspective, words like "female" and "male" are cultural categories that have as much (if not more) to do with creating reality as they do with objectively naming it. Since the categories are cultural creations, they inevitably differ across cultures and shift over time. In general, for example, the idea that everyone must have a clear and fixed identity as male or female is relatively new in human societies, and contrasts with societies that provide other alternatives.²⁶ The Native American Navahos, for example, allow those born with sexual "ambiguities" to occupy a third sex category (called "nadle") with its own legitimate social standing. In some other cultures people have been allowed to choose their gender regardless of what it appears to be "objectively." Historically this was true in several Native American Plains tribes, for example, where men sometimes responded to a spiritual vision by taking on the dress and social standing of women.²⁷

In our everyday lives we pay scant attention to the deep patriarchal roots

that shape both the world we live in and our seemingly private selves. There are many reasons for this and much that gets in the way that thread together to make a tangled knot. Finding a way to unravel that knot is the major purpose of this book.

We'd Rather Not Know

We're as stuck as we are primarily because we can't or won't acknowledge the roots of patriarchy and our involvement in it. We show no enthusiasm for going deeper than a surface obsession with sex and gender. We resist even saying the word "patriarchy" in polite conversation. We act as if patriarchy weren't there, because the realization that it does exist is a door that swings only one way and we can't go back again to not knowing. We're like a family colluding in silence over dark secrets of damage and abuse, or like "good and decent Germans" during the Holocaust who "never knew" anything terrible was being done. We cling to the illusion that everything is basically all right, that bad things don't happen to good people, that good people can't participate in the production of evil, and that if we only leave things alone they'll stay pretty much as they are and, we often like to think, always have been.

Many women, of course, do dare to see and speak the truth, but they are always in danger of being attacked and discredited in order to maintain the silence. Even those who would never call themselves feminists often know there is something terribly wrong with the structures of dominance and control that are so central to life in modern societies and without which we think we cannot survive. The public response to feminism has been ferociously defensive precisely because feminism touches such a deep nerve of truth and the denial that keeps us from it. If feminism were truly ridiculous, it would be ignored. But it isn't ridiculous, and so it provokes a vigorous backlash.

We shouldn't be too hard on ourselves for hanging on to denial and illusions about patriarchy. Letting go is risky business, and patriarchy is full of smoke and mirrors that make it difficult to see what has to be let go of. It's relatively easy to accept the idea of patriarchy as male-dominated and male-identified, for example, and even as male-centered. Many people, however, have a much harder time seeing women as oppressed.²⁸ This is a huge issue that sparks a lot of arguments, and for that reason it will take several chapters to do it justice. Still, it's worthwhile outlining a basic response here.

The reluctance to see women as oppressed has several sources. The first

is that many women enjoy race or class privilege and it's difficult for many to see them as oppressed without, as Sam Keen put it, insulting "truly oppressed" groups such as the lower classes or racial minorities.²⁹ How, for example, can we count upper-class women among the oppressed and lower-class men among their oppressors?

Although Keen's objection has a certain logic to it, it rests on a confusion between the position of women and men as groups and as individuals. To identify "female" as an oppressed status under patriarchy doesn't mean that every woman suffers its consequences to an equal degree, just as living in a racist society doesn't mean that every person of color suffers equally or that every white person shares equally in the benefits of race privilege. Living in patriarchy does mean, however, that every woman must come to grips with an inferior gender *position* and that whatever she achieves will be *in spite of* that position. With the exception of child care and other domestic work and a few paid occupations related to it, women in almost every field of adult endeavor must labor under the presumption that they are inferior to men, that they are interlopers from the margins of society who must justify their participation. Men may have such experiences because of their race, ethnicity, or other minority standing, but rarely if ever because they're men.

It is in this sense that patriarchies are male-dominated even though most individual men may not *feel* dominant, especially in relation to other men. This is a crucial insight that rests on the fact that when we talk about societies, words like dominance and oppression describe relations between categories of people such as whites and Hispanics, lower and upper classes, or women and men. How dominance and oppression actually play out among individuals is another issue. Sexism, for example, is an ideology, a set of ideas that promote male privilege in part by portraying women as inferior to men. But depending on other social factors such as race, class, or age, individual men will vary in their ability to take advantage of sexism and the benefits it produces. We can make a similar argument about women and the price they pay for belonging to a subordinate group. Upper-class women, for example, are insulated to some degree from the oppressive effects of being women under patriarchy, such as discrimination in the workplace. Their class privilege, however, exists *in spite of* their subordinate standing as women, which they can never completely overcome, especially in relation to husbands.³⁰ No woman is immune, for example, to the cultural devaluing of women's bodies as sexual objects to be exploited in public and private life, or the ongoing threat of sexual and domestic violence. To a rapist, the most powerful woman in the land is first and foremost a woman, and this more than anything else culturally marks her as a potential victim.

Along with not seeing women as oppressed, we resist seeing men as a privileged oppressor group. This is especially true of men who are aware of their own suffering, who often argue that men and women are both oppressed because of their gender and that neither oppresses the other. Undoubtedly men do suffer because of their participation in patriarchy, but it isn't because men are oppressed *as men*. For women, gender oppression is linked to a cultural devaluing of femaleness itself. Women are subordinated and treated as inferior because they are culturally defined as inferior *as women*, just as many racial and ethnic minorities are devalued simply because they aren't considered to be white. Men,³⁰ however, do not suffer because maleness is devalued as an oppressed status in relation to some higher, more powerful one. Instead, to the extent that men suffer as men—and not because they're also poor or a racial or ethnic minority—it's because they belong to the dominant gender group in a system of gender oppression, which both privileges them and exacts a price in return.

A key to understanding this is that a group cannot oppress itself. A group can inflict injury on itself, and its members can suffer from their position in society. But if we say that a group can oppress or persecute *itself* we turn the concept of social oppression into a mere synonym for socially caused suffering, which it isn't.³¹ Oppression is a social phenomenon that happens between different groups in a society; it is a system of social inequality through which one group is positioned to dominate and benefit from the exploitation and subordination of another. This means not only that a group cannot oppress itself, but also that it cannot be oppressed *by society*. Oppression is a relation that exists *between groups*, not between groups and society as a whole.

To understand oppression, then, we must distinguish it from suffering that has other social roots. Even the massive suffering inflicted on men through the horrors of war is not an oppression of men *as men*, because there is no system in which a group of non-men enforces and benefits from men's suffering. The systems that control the machinery of war are themselves patriarchal, which makes it impossible for them to oppress men as men. Warfare *does* oppress racial and ethnic minorities and the poor, who are often served up as cannon fodder by privileged classes whose interests war most often serves. Some 80 percent of all U.S. troops who served in Vietnam, for example, were from working- and lower-class backgrounds.³² But this oppression is based on race and class, not gender. When Warren Farrell argues that men are "disposable," he confuses male gender, which is privileged, with classes and races that are indeed regarded as disposable.³³ If

war made men truly disposable *as men*, we wouldn't find monuments and cemeteries in virtually every city and town in the United States dedicated to fallen soldiers (with no mention of their race or class), or endless retrospectives on the fiftieth anniversary of every milestone in World War II.

Rather than devalue or degrade patriarchal manhood, warfare celebrates and affirms it. As I write this on the fiftieth anniversary of the Normandy invasion, I can't help but feel the power of the honor and solemn mourning accorded the casualties of war, the deep respect opponents often feel for one another, and the countless monuments dedicated to men killed while trying to kill other men whose names, in turn, are inscribed on still more monuments.³⁴ But these ritual remembrances do more than sanctify sacrifice and tragic loss, they also sanctify war itself and the patriarchal institutions that promote it. Military leaders whose misguided orders, blunders, and egomaniacal schemes brought death to tens of thousands, for example, earn not ridicule, disgust, and scorn but a curious historical immunity framed in images of noble tragedy and heroic masculine endeavor. In stark contrast to massive graveyards of honored dead, the memorials, the annual speeches and parades, there are no monuments to the millions of women and children caught in the slaughter and bombed, burned, starved, raped, and left homeless. An estimated nine out of ten wartime casualties are civilians, not soldiers, and these include a huge proportion of children and women,³⁵ but there are no great national cemeteries devoted to *them*. War, after all, is a man's thing.

Perhaps one of the deepest reasons for denying the reality of women's oppression is that we don't want to admit that a real basis for conflict exists between men and women. We don't want to admit it because, unlike other groups involved in social oppression, such as whites and blacks, females and males really need each other, if only as parents and children. This can make us reluctant to see how patriarchy puts us at odds regardless of what we want or how we feel about it. Who wants to consider the role of gender oppression in everyday married and family life? Who wants to know how dependent we are on patriarchy as a system, how deeply our thoughts, feelings, and behavior are embedded in it? Men resist seeing the oppression of their mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters because we've participated in it, benefited from it, and developed a vested interest in it. We resist seeing our fathers as members of an oppressor group and may join Robert Bly in his defensive portraits of fathers as hapless victims of women and unseen social forces in which male interests magically play no part. We resist, perhaps because in our fathers we see ourselves and because we're still trying to figure

out why they didn't love us very well, or were never around, or were around but in the wrong ways. And we struggle to figure all that out in the hope that if we do, we might be able to have them after all and become something different ourselves.

Harder still is seeing our fathers linked to the oppression of our mothers, or our mothers' unavoidable collusion in their own oppression, playing at being less than they are, giving themselves away in the name of perfect motherhood, tolerating neglect and abuse. All of this we resist, because we couldn't help taking our mothers and fathers into ourselves and making them part of our deepest longings and most enduring expectations. And in the process we also drew into our deepest selves core elements from the patriarchal roots of gender oppression.

But, once again, we must remember that as deeply as the patriarchal tree shapes our lives, we are the leaves and not the roots, trunk, or branches. We're too easily blinded by the good guy/bad guy fallacy that says that only evil people can participate in and benefit from societies that produce evil consequences. We act as though patriarchy and sexism can be reduced to personality types, as if our participation shows we've failed as people. But like any social system, patriarchy can't be reduced to personal feelings, intentions, and motivations. It's impossible, for example, to live in this world and not participate in industrial capitalism. We read about the sweatshops in Southeast Asia and the United States in which workers (mostly women) labor for little pay under appalling conditions, and we may feel anger at such cruelty and comfort ourselves that our good intentions and benevolent feelings somehow lift us above such things. But a quick look through our closets and the labels on our clothing will probably show otherwise, that yesterday's bargain was made in Thailand or New York or Mexico and subsidized by the exploitation of those very same workers. This doesn't make us evil, as if we had set out to harm these people; but it does *involve* us in the social production of evil. In the same way, men don't have to feel cruel or malevolent toward women in order to participate in and benefit from patriarchy as a system. This is a crucial distinction that makes the difference between being stuck in a defensive moral paralysis and seeing how to participate in change.

There are many ways to avoid facing the world in us and ourselves in the world. But it has to get done sooner or later, because any society that doesn't take seriously enough the critical process of creating alternatives to itself probably doesn't have much of a future. Change work is both frightening and exciting. It loosens the boundaries of our taken-for-granted reality, and

when we feel lost we need to learn how to be "lost comfortably," like Sam Keen's mountain man who never got lost in spite of long periods when he didn't know how to get where he was going.³⁶

We can move toward a clearer and more critical awareness of what patriarchy is about, of what gets in the way of working to end it, and new ways for all of us—men in particular—to participate in its long evolutionary process of turning into something else. Patriarchy is our collective legacy, and there's nothing we can do about that or the condition in which we received it. But we can do a lot about what we pass on to those who follow us.