Polly Young-Eisendrath

Gender & Desire

Uncursing Pandora

Foreword by David H. Rosen

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It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly . . . And fatal is no figure of speech; for anything written with a conscious bias is doomed to death. It ceases to be fertilized . . . Some collaboration has to take place in the mind between the woman and the man before the action of creation can be accomplished. Some marriage of opposites has to be consummated.¹

—Virginia Woolf

Dr. Polly Young-Eisendrath embraces Virginia Woolf’s prescription and this book represents an act of creation that will endure. Young-Eisendrath is a true scholar: a learned person and an original thinker. She’s also brave, challenging us to think in new ways. In the past, Young-Eisendrath has confronted sexism in certain aspects of analytical psychology.² In this work she shows how and why this sexism arises and offers a postmodern (post-Jungian) perspective that both allows her to embrace analytical psychology and to help us grow through transformative understanding. In addition, she is a great teacher who through word (speaking and writing) and deed (embodying her topic) has as her goal to change the way you think about things.

She changed the minds of many of my students, among whom
was a young man in the Corps of Cadets. The Corps, with two thousand members, is a visible symbol of the past at Texas A&M University (TAMU), a previously all male uniformed military college. Today TAMU is integrated in every way, and half of the forty-five thousand student population is female. My student was skeptical about attending lectures given by an “ardent feminist.” However, he was motivated by the possibility of raising his grade. In evaluating Young-Eisendrath’s Fay Lecture Series in a review essay, he wrote that the ideas that she presented had changed his views about women and men forever. Courageously he admitted that his opposition to feminism, in particular, had been based on prejudiced ideas that he had incorporated from the culture at large. His transformation from an unexamined sexism to an active, conscious feminism was especially notable because of the military nature of his academic experience. This example illustrates how Dr. Young-Eisendrath effectively communicates her ideas, facilitating change even in the most resistant individuals.

This book resulted from Dr. Young-Eisendrath’s Fay Lectures on “Gender, Myth, and Desire.” The basic myth she explores is now named in the book’s subtitle Gender and Desire: Uncursing Pandora. In myth, a tale larger than life, there is an articulation of something we ardently desire. Pandora (the first woman of ancient patriarchal Greek mythology), like the Biblical Eve, is a beautiful but empty temptress. In our culture, there is a passionate longing for the patriarchal prototype of the object of desire who promises pleasure and power. Women identify with her and men want to possess her. But her power is deceptive and misleading as it is based on illusion. Nevertheless, like the yin of the Taoist yin/yang symbol, this dark symbol contains light. After Pandora opens the earthenware jar and all the evils are released into the world, hope remains in the form of a bird (a symbol of the spirit world). Hope connects us to what Young-Eisendrath calls the fundamental transcendent coherence of our universe, referred to by Jung as the
Self—a sacred unifying principle. Making sense of Pandora, we come to a new vision of women and men.

Young-Eisendrath focuses in detail on the Pandora myth which she deconstructs. In the process, which involves us by *participation mystique*, it becomes clear that we must uncurse and liberate Pandora and help transform her into a healthy woman of our time. The issue of gender becomes reality based on the human experience of the contrasexual aspect of our own psyches. For men, this means relating to and with the contrasexual “feminine” or inner woman in a different way, expressed in their relationships with women. For women, it means actualizing the contrasexual “masculine” or inner man and becoming whole, that is, becoming their own subjects of desire.

In this small volume Dr. Young-Eisendrath outlines a way, which if followed will lead to more harmonious inner and outer relationships. It will also hopefully help to reverse the outer hatred of the opposite sex and the epidemic of divorce that plagues our culture.

At the outset in chapter one, “The Problem of Realism in Analytical Psychology,” Dr. Young-Eisendrath uses an analogy of baseball umpires to illustrate three world views: premodern, modern, and postmodern. The premodern umpire is an empiricist whose reality is based on observation: “I calls ’em as I sees ’em.” The modern umpire is a realist whose truth is based on fact: “I calls ’em as they are.” Finally, the postmodern umpire is a relativist who knows that all facts and truths are rooted in subjective understanding: “They ain’t nothin’ ’til I calls ’em!” I like the umpire analogy, the sense of fairness it represents, and that each umpire has a uniquely valuable perspective. The three views seem to reflect our past, present, and future, and are all vital to an integrated view of reality. However, it is clear that the postmodern view brings reality home and makes it part of our human experience: we are forced to own up to our role in shaping reality. A lived postmodern philosophy is essential for change to occur.
Dr. Young-Eisendrath rightly critiques analytical psychology for freezing and reifying some concepts such as anima and animus. I believe that Jung himself would have criticized a dogmatic approach; after all, he wrote, “I criticize Freudian psychology for a certain narrowness and bias, and the Freudians for a certain rigid, sectarian spirit of intolerance and fanaticism. I proclaim no cut-and-dried doctrine and I abhor ‘blind adherents.’” My hunch is that Jung would have supported Young-Eisendrath’s emphasis on constructivism and hermeneutics. While Jung discovered meaning through ideas, he also did this through a process of deconstruction, hermeneutics, and constructivism. For example, as early as Jung’s break with Freud, Jung was deconstructing Freud’s patriarchal view of women. Jung’s innovative ideas of anima and animus (which Young-Eisendrath carefully deconstructs) were also deconstructed and reconstructed through a hermeneutical process by Jung himself when he actualized “the inner marriage” in his later years.

In her second chapter on “Gender, Contrasexuality, and Self,” Young-Eisendrath defines sex as a biological constraint that is inflexible and gender as a social construct which is flexible and dependent on context. There are only two gender clubs for humans and this division leads to some important psychological developments. Dr. Young-Eisendrath accurately states that most psychological theories, including Jung’s, were developed by men and were (and are) patriarchal or androcentric. Her post-Jungian perspective, one of shared power and gender equality, is similar to other post-Jungian theorists such as Verena Kast, June Singer, and Demaris Wehr who all see “androgyny” and its association with individuation and mental health as a goal for women and men to attain.

Dr. Young-Eisendrath introduces the concept of the “other,” “strange gender,” or “dream lover” (the contrasexual aspect of the psyche) which we initially project onto the opposite sex. Young-Eisendrath underscores that the androcentric socio-cultural milieu we live in is grossly unfair to women. For example, it’s fine for
girls to be tom boys but it’s not okay for boys to be tom girls! Because of the cultural emphasis on possessing objects, jealously flourishes in our society. Envy (an even more primitive emotion): a desire to destroy, also thrives in our culture. Falling in love represents the flip side of envy, i.e. the idealization of women, which is a hollow patriarchal Pandora scenario. Love and intimacy ought to begin at home with the love of the contrasexual aspect of oneself, that is, the inner love of the other within. This “inner marriage” allows us to love another person of the opposite sex with authenticity, equality, and mutuality.

Dr. Young-Eisendrath’s third chapter “Pandora and the Object of Desire” focuses on women as objects of desire. In other words, according to the patriarchy, women are there to please and fulfill men. The living myth of Pandora says to women: be beautiful and you’ll have power. But this power is also labeled as manipulative, empty, and negative. In the myth, Pandora has deceit in place of heart. Like in the lower levels of Buddhist hell, contemporary Pandora has an insatiable desire and she is searching for satisfaction. Similarly to the Buddhist hungry ghost, she is driven by rage and emptiness. However, Pandora’s curiosity contains the seed of her (and our) salvation. By opening the jar that the patriarch said not to open, she let’s out all the evils (disease, death, etc.), but hope remains. So there is hope that a transformation can and will take place.

The patriarchal emphasis on outer beauty has led so many women to sacrifice their bodies and ‘true selves.’ Mary Pipher’s superb book, Reviving Ophelia, documents the tragic effects of sexism and what she calls “lookism” on adolescent girls. The eating disorders (anorexia nervosa, bulimia, excessive thinness, and overeating) represent some of the negative fallout from living the Pandora myth. Rape and other forms of violence toward women are disastrous results of this patriarchal curse. In men these anti-female urges translate into suicidal rages against their own souls and inner contrasexuality. As a culture, we must wake up to the
effects of this living myth and transform its curse. Feminism and postmodernism demand that we view each other—men and women—as equals and with reverence.

Dr. Young-Eisendrath’s last chapter on “Subject of Desire,” focuses on uncursing Pandora. She must find her lost heart and soul. Pandora must love her inner “other” or “strange gender.” Subsequently, each woman needs to actualize her full potential. We are all in need of a fundamental shift: We must get beyond the dominance myth of the patriarchy which necessitates uncursing and liberating of Pandora. This is what feminism was (and is) about: The human experience of each woman becoming her own person. Men must understand that uncursing Pandora liberates not only women but also themselves.

Dr. Young-Eisendrath’s illuminating and timely book promises hope and provides the needed postmodern remedy called for by Demaris Wehr:

*The next step for Jungians is to step back and allow the “feminine” to arise out of women’s experience, not imposing, on this term, or on women, Jung’s ambivalence or the culture- and gender-based limitations of his perspective.*

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