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Author of *Iron John*

THE
SIBLING
SOCIÈTY

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◆ *Addison-Wesley Publishing Company*

Reading, Massachusetts Menlo Park, California New York
Don Mills, Ontario Harlow, England Amsterdam Bonn
Sydney Singapore Tokyo Madrid San Juan
Paris Seoul Milan Mexico City Taipei

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bly, Robert.

The sibling society / Robert Bly.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-201-40646-2

1. Culture. 2. Popular culture. 3. Social values.
4. Intergenerational relations. 5. Youthfulness. I. Title.

HM101.B6165 1996

306—dc20

95-42630

CIP

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Jacket design by David High

Text design by Diane Levy

Set in 10.5-point Stone Serif by Pagesetters, Inc.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9-MA-0099989796

First printing, March 1996

Introduction

IT'S THE WORST OF TIMES; IT'S THE BEST OF TIMES. THAT'S HOW we feel as we navigate from a paternal society, now discredited, to a society in which impulse is given its way. People don't bother to grow up, and we are all fish swimming in a tank of half-adults. The rule is: Where repression was before, fantasy will now be; we human beings limp along, running after our own fantasy. We can never catch up, and so we defeat ourselves by the simplest possible means: speed. Everywhere we go there's a crowd, and the people all look alike.

We begin to live a lateral life, catch glimpses out of the corners of our eyes, keep the TV set at eye level, watch the scores move horizontally across the screen.

We see what's coming out of the sideview mirror. It seems like intimacy; maybe not intimacy as much as proximity; maybe not proximity as much as sameness. Americans who are twenty years old see others who look like them in Czechoslovakia, Greece, China, France, Brazil, Germany, and Russia, wearing the same jeans, listening to the same music, speaking a universal language that computer literacy demands. Sometimes they feel more vitally connected to siblings elsewhere than to family members in the next room.

When we see the millions like ourselves all over the world, our

eyes meet uniformity, resemblance, likenesses, rather than distinction and differences. Hope rises immediately for the long-desired possibility of community. And yet it would be foolish to overlook the serious implications of this glance to the side, this tilt of the head. "Mass society, with its demand for work without responsibility, creates a gigantic army of rival siblings," in Alexander Mitscherlich's words.

This book is not about siblings in a family; we'll use the word *sibling* as a metaphor. We'll try to make the phrase *sibling society* into a lens, bringing into focus certain tendencies, habits, and griefs we have all noticed. Adults regress toward adolescence; and adolescents—seeing that—have no desire to become adults. Few are able to imagine any genuine life coming from the vertical plane—tradition, religion, devotion. Even graduate students in science are said to share this problem. The neuroscientist Robert Sapolsky writes:

My students usually come with ego boundaries like exoskeletons. Most have no use for religion, precedents, or tradition. They want their rituals newly minted and shared horizontally within their age group, not vertically over time. The ones I train to become scientists go at it like warriors, overturning reigning paradigms, each discovery a murder of their scientific ancestors.

Perhaps one-third of our society has developed these new sibling qualities. The rest of us are walking in that direction. When we all arrive, there may be no public schools at all, nor past paradigms, because only people one's own age will be worth listening to.

There is little in the sibling society to prevent a slide into primitivism, and into those regressions that fascism is so fond of. Eric Hoffer remarked:

Drastic change [has produced] this social primitivism . . . a new identity is found by embracing a mass movement . . . [the] mass movement absorbs and assimilates the individual . . . [who] is thereby reduced to an infantile state, for this is what a new birth

really means: to become like a child. And children are primitive beings—they are credulous, follow a leader, and readily become members of a pack. . . . Finally, primitivism also follows when people seek a new identity by plunging into ceaseless action and hustling. It takes leisure to mature. People in a hurry can neither grow nor decay; they are preserved in a state of perpetual puerility.

The society of half-adults, built on technology and affluence, is more highly developed here than in any other country on earth; but in other parts of the globe the same tendencies are growing fast. We can't be definitive, but we can glance at some of its characteristics.

IT IS HARD IN A SIBLING SOCIETY TO DECIDE WHAT IS REAL. WE participate in more and more nonevents. A nonevent transpires when the organizer promises an important psychic or political event and then cheats people, providing material only tangentially related. An odd characteristic of the sibling society is that no one effectively *objects*. Some sort of trance takes over if enough people are watching an event simultaneously. It is a contemporary primitivism, "participation mystique," a "mysterious participation of all the clan."

Kierkegaard once, in trying to predict what the future society would be like, offered this metaphor: People will put up a poster soon saying *Tonight John Erik will skate on thin ice at the very center of the pond. It'll be very dangerous. Please come.* Everyone comes, and John Erik skates about three inches from shore, and people say, "Look, he's skating on thin ice at the very center of the pond!" A lecturer says: *On Friday night we will have a revolution.* When Friday night comes, the hall is filled, and the radical talks passionately and flamboyantly for an hour and a half; then he declares that a revolution took place here tonight. The audience pours out into the street, saying, "Tonight we had a revolution! Tonight we had a revolution!"

Nonevents are now a regular national feature. Millions watch them—Tiny Tim being married on Johnny Carson's "Tonight

Show," CNN reporting the Grenada invasion, elaborate celebrity efforts such as "We Are the World." In a recent nonevent, Diane Sawyer interviewed Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie Presley, implying a promise to confront the dark secrets of Jackson's past, and a promise that she herself would be an adult in her concern for the truth. She was not an adult that night, and the hidden event was a marriage of Sony and ABC.

IT'S HARD FOR JOURNALISTS OR ORDINARY PEOPLE TO GET AWAY from envy when they look at a leader. Every detail of a president's life is used to discredit him. President Clinton has his faults, but no other American president has been put in the stocks so soon and left there so long. Recent biographies of Franklin Roosevelt mention how careful journalists at that time were not to photograph him when he was moved from his car to a wheelchair. It wasn't an attempt to hide failings, but to give him some place of dignity in his leadership.

The *American Spectator* carries ads offering pins that say "It's a Bird . . . It's a Plane . . . It's Hillary, Nix the Witch in '96," or a bumper sticker for \$3 reading "Newt's Mom Was Right." Journalists and ordinary citizens join together in this mixture of envy and aggression. Adam Gopnick, in his piece on recent journalism, remarks:

In the past twenty years, the American press has undergone a transformation from an access culture to an aggression culture. . . . Aggression has become a kind of abstract form, practiced in a void of ideas, or even of ordinary sympathy. . . .

One sad result of this habit of envy and aggression is the utter discouragement and bitterness of voters, who move into an adolescent place in relation to the duties of citizenship.

IT IS HARD TO BE AS POPULAR AS WE ARE SUPPOSED TO BE. THE superego or Interior Judge has altered its requirements. An Interior

Judge that once demanded high standards in art, in writing, and in ethics now requires early success, at twenty or twenty-two. Those insinuations on early success have devastated the art world.

The French writer Giles Lipovetsky says, "The superego presents itself under the guise of demands for fame and success which, if they are not achieved, unleash an implacable storm of criticism against the ego." The Interior Judge remains authoritarian and brutal, but it no longer asks the citizen to be honorable, disciplined, and noble; now it wants its owner to have public gratification. We could say the superego wants everyone to appear on talk shows, the very act that it would have forbidden as vulgar a hundred years ago.

The Interior Judge's changed requirements, paradoxically, give the media much more power than they have ever had before; and the media's accidental conferring of fame can become highly dangerous to the unwary. A recent example is Robert O'Donnell, the man who became famous for bringing Baby Jessica out of the well in Midland, Texas. He enjoyed his fame in the beginning, being interviewed and feted; but later he, or more accurately his superego, could not reconcile himself to the loss of attention that followed. He lost his job and then his family; developed migraine headaches; and finally, last year, killed himself.

Psychoanalysts describe the Interior Judge as they see it operating in youngsters now with terms such as "terroristic"; like a mad bomber, it can't be talked out of its demands. People in cultures of the past, and still in many cultures today, were able to reason with their conscience, talk to it, get a relaxing of admonitions, a forgiveness of sins. But the new Interior Judge hijacks the teenager and shoots all potential rescuers. The hangdog look, the druggy and disheartened mood, the lack of grace in body movements, the stammering in speech, are caused not by laziness or by being spoiled but by a constant humiliation administered by this new Judge.

Most adults have been slow to grasp how perfectionist the changed Interior Judge of their children is, and how savage. The Judge is more perfectionist than ever, but now there is not enough fame or popularity in the world to satisfy it. For parents to try to

encourage the development of their children is natural, but now there is something desperate in it for both parents and children. If a teenager is not invited to the dance, she may try suicide. A high school boy, scoffed at, may retreat behind his computer for ten years.

That is how the picture looks among the advantaged. In the other half of society we see the absolute despair of young black men, who don't need an Interior Judge to tell them they have no chance of finding a good-paying job, or any job. They have the longing and the wanting and no legal possibility of satisfying it. As we all know, one out of three young black men are in the criminal justice system in some form. Their despair is beginning to resonate through the entire culture; that is why suburban children want rap music.

In the past, an authoritarian Judge demanded obedience to parents, insisted on sexual "purity," and, one could say, advocated high morals. The Interior Judge no longer uses Jesus or Gandhi to keep its bearings, but must shift instead to Barbra Streisand or Michael Jackson or a television anchor. For the one who fails to become successful and well loved, punishment is swift and thorough. Self-esteem receives a battering from inside, everyone feels insignificant and unseen, until, in desperation, we finally agree to go on a talk show and tell it all. Once that moment is over, and universal love has not poured over our heads following the program, we fall still farther. Sadly, longing for perfection in ourselves is, in the phrase of one observer, "perfectly compatible with indifference toward others."

Why has the Interior Judge become so brutal and terroristic? We can say that advertising from a child's earliest years has so influenced the greedy, desirous part of the child's soul that the resisting force, the Judge, has to enlarge itself in order to combat the inflamed wanting. The Interior Judge, moreover, can no longer rely on outward authority in its battle against impulse. Having to resist without help from the parents or teachers, it has to do it all alone, and so it naturally moves toward a primitive, humorless savagery, well expressed in grunge rock, action movies, and piercing of body parts.

The idea that our Interior Judge has changed its demands from requiring us to be good to requiring us to be famous is very sobering.

If the superego, detached from verticality and stretched out across the horizontal plane, truly has changed, it means that consumer capitalism's dependence on stimulating greed and desirousness has changed something fundamental inside the human being, a result that Freud never anticipated.

IN A SIBLING SOCIETY, IT IS HARD TO KNOW HOW TO APPROACH one's children, what values to try to teach them, what to stand up for, what to go along with; it is especially hard to know where your children are.

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Part One

JACK, THE
BEANSTALK, AND
THE HALF-ADULT

CHAPTER ONE

The Woodstock Moment

MICHAEL VENTURA HAS SAID THAT AT SOME MOMENT IN 1956, when Elvis Presley let his pelvis move to the music on the Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey show, all the parents in the United States lost their children in a single night.

The first Woodstock thirteen years later signaled a change in American culture. Some unjust severity had been overcome or bypassed. Fundamentalist harshness, Marxist rigidity, the stiff ethic of high school superintendents, had passed away. People greeted each other, clothed or naked, in delight, feeling that a victory of humanness had taken place.

With the help of rock music, young men and women felt freed from a parental or institutional tyrant, the one with a thin nose, a black coat, and steel-rimmed glasses, the one who had told them in grade school to sit down, to behave, to repress sexual impulses, to hold their bodies stiffly, to salute the flag and stand up when a teacher enters the room. The popular heroes of the late 1950s, James Dean, Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, and Jack Kerouac, all took part in that struggle to loosen everyone up, and were loved for it by the older brothers and sisters of the Woodstock young. At Woodstock, the high school students won. What had they won? A battle against what Jules Henry in 1962 called "the Indo-European, Islamic,

Hebraic impulse-control system." That's a mouthful, but it says it well.

All of us who lived in the 1950s saw so many lives destroyed by repression, by fear, by internalized superintendents, by shaming, by workaholism. By 1969, it felt as if human beings were able for the first time in history to choose their own roads, choose what to do with their own bodies, choose the visionary possibilities formerly shut off by that "control system."

Elvis was a part of what women had longed for, not militaristic, not rigid in feeling, not exclusionary toward mothers and young women, but lighthearted, open to impulses rising from below his belt, playful, and yet grounded in sexuality, heavier than Peter Pan, more human than the stiff-faced old grandfather who wound clocks. Young women felt themselves losing some of their Doris Day rigidity, their shame over their own sexual impulses. Why shouldn't a young woman make love with a man she found attractive, any man? Why shouldn't she encourage pornography to help loosen up the males? Why shouldn't she give up her mother's stuff about waiting until the ring is on the hand before having fun with zippers?

Schools had taught for centuries "the Indo-European, Islamic, Hebraic impulse-control system." The impulse-control system smelled of limitation; schools stank of it. The Indo-European, Islamic, Hebraic impulse-control system reeked of the bald, the severe, the cabined, the icebound, the squat, the cramped, the dinky, the narrow, the scanty, the roped-in, the meager, the bad, the tame. Woodstock, on the other hand, smelled of the grandiose, the foot-loose, the grandiloquent, the lofty, the radical, the bountiful, the prodigal, the free-spirited, the free-speaking, the free-tongued, the unconditional, the escaped, the unbuttoned, the cut loose, the exonerated, the unreined, the good, the princely, the escaped.

In 1962 Jules Henry interviewed a number of high school students for his book *Culture Against Man*. Repeatedly he heard them say that they liked whichever parent let them do what they wanted. "What the children talk about most is whether the parent 'lets me' or

‘doesn’t let me.’ What permits impulse release is ‘good’ and anything that blocks it is ‘bad.’ ”

What is cause and what is effect is hard to know, but some fathers—and some mothers—gave up their strictness in the late 1950s and early 1960s. One could say that teachers and parents and certainly the popular media gave up defending “the Indo-European, Islamic, Hebraic impulse-control system” which subscribed to a certain asceticism for the young, postponement of pleasure, hard work, no fooling around.

When the Englishman Geoffrey Gorer visited the United States, he noticed the extraordinary desire of American grown-ups to be loved. They didn’t seem to feel it necessary to love in return; rather, to be the object of love was all that was required. How could one be more clearly worthy of love than to agree to whatever your children want?

The movie *Mrs. Doubtfire* provides a clear example of this. As it begins, the father, played by Robin Williams, is already so far advanced along the permissive route that his “let’s all be funny” party actually precipitates divorce; the reluctant wife is then left to stand alone for superego values. (The scriptwriters make her a lawyer.)

Why would fathers, in particular, suddenly want love so much from their children? Jules Henry guessed that the American workplace had become more cold and barren than it was in the nineteenth century. A man received little fellow-feeling there, and needed more of it at home. Those years saw the “unmasking of a masculine hunger for emotional gratification.” “Deprived in his work life of personality aspirations, the American father reaches deeply into the emotional resources of his family for gratifications formerly considered womanly—the tenderness and closeness of his children; and his children reach thirstily toward him.” Perhaps the fathers didn’t feel enough loving support from the “village” (now transmuted into the suburb), or perhaps they missed love from their grandparents, or had become conscious of how little love their remote fathers gave them. For whatever reason, many fathers in the