



## Book Review

*The Tending Instinct: How Nurturing is Essential to Who We Are and How We Live*  
by Shelley E. Taylor, Henry Holt, New York, 2002

Reviewed by Judith E. Lipton

The concept is brilliant and it rings true: under stress, females are more likely to hunker down, care for their offspring, and turn to other females for social support, rather than to fight or flee. The latter, of course, is the dominant model of stress, which Dr. Taylor asserts (quite correctly, in my view) to be not only flawed, but based on sexist assumptions; after all, “fight or flight” is a conceptual model suggested by a man - Hans Selye - and most of the subsequent research about stress, until the mid 90s, was conducted only on male animals because “female hormones cycle too much.” And so, females were simply excluded, while stress research addressed male physiology as though it were the stripped down, basic model common to both sexes, without those nasty hormone fluctuations. This male bias was true in medicine generally, not only the study of stress.

Taylor challenges the master theory with impeccable and appealing logic: under stress, it makes sense for a male animal (humans included) to fight or flee. After all, most of the stress that a male encounters is either social stress from other males - vying for status, access or resources and females - or stress from predator/prey relationships. Eat or be eaten.

Fight or forfeit sex. If you are a male from a polygynous species, you spend your life competing with other males, and contrary to Hollywood stereotypes, the majority of males lose in these competitions. For every dominant alpha individual, well endowed with strength, cleverness, and hence females, there are more who lose out, and therefore end up as resentful and unsuccessful betas, deltas, and zetas. And, of course, the zetas are probably bachelors to boot. Subordinate males lead lives of stress and chaos, more likely than dominants to die in conflicts, from infections or as prey. So, if you are a male, fight or flight is the name of the game. In this regard, Selye and his intellectual descendants were correct: There is little rest for a sperm bearer.

Fight or flight makes little sense for a female. Females face a different set of challenges. If there is stress, whether a predator, environmental crisis, or obnoxious males, why should a mother try to fight - she is unlikely to win against any male, due to size differences - or flee, abandoning her babies? It makes more sense for such a female to lie low, take care of her offspring, and turn to her social network - other females, often kin - for help and defense.

Males may fight or flee, but in Dr. Taylor's words, females "tend and befriend."

When I first read Dr. Taylor's original paper, published in *Psychological Review* in 2000<sup>1</sup>, I was so excited about tend and befriend that I designed the psychosocial support program for breast cancer patients at Providence Hospital (Swedish Medical Centers) with Taylor's insights in mind. Tend and befriend just fits, it's hot, it's a catchy phrase with a sophisticated message; once you hear it, you know it to be true. Women under stress turn to each other, and take care of their families, rather than fight or flight. I see it in my cancer patients every day. Young women stricken with breast cancer are preoccupied with protecting their families, and turn to mothers, friends, and groups for support. Admittedly, many caring husbands and male health care providers step up to the plate too, providing help and comfort for these women. But the heart to heart stuff is female. . We women talk to each other, confide, whine, wail, plan, and just plain kibbitz, and stress subsides once we feel heard and understood.

Back to the book. Its chapters on the biology of tending are fine, exploring the neurocircuitry of affiliative bonding in parent-offspring, sexual, and family relationships. There is hardwiring in the brain for love. Little neuropeptides associated with reproduction also create social affiliation, just as norepinephrine is the brain's burglar alarm triggering fight or flight. Taylor provides a nice overview of the oxytocin story, a real "love potion #9" within the mammalian CNS.

I particularly like the chapter titled "The social context of tending", a review of the cost of social stress in modern society. "Harassment," writes Taylor, "is handed down from higher-status to lower status animals, and those at the bottom are everyone's doormat and punching bag." This is particularly relevant these days, when the gap between haves and have-nots – both individuals and societies - is widening, and class warfare has become a slur (especially when the poor object to being

abused by the wealthy!). Taylor does a good job of explaining why poor people get sick at higher rates than the rich, a discrepancy attributable not only to simple lack of money but also to social disruptions. Her concluding call for a liberal "tending society" is one that I heartily endorse, although unfortunately, the current political climate in the United States makes such a development unlikely, at least for the next few years.

My only gripe is this: I don't think Taylor thoroughly understands evolutionary biology. She bashes evolutionary psychologists as portraying the human social landscape as "a battleground, where the successful outmaneuver the weak through a competitive edge, deception, or sheer blunt force." But she is trashing a straw man. This "nature red in tooth and claw" nonsense is old hat, a misunderstanding of Darwinian selection that goes back to Alfred Tennyson, Herbert Spencer, and Rudyard Kipling. Much of the sociobiologic revolution dealt precisely with cooperation and tending, starting with Hamilton's brilliant analysis of why female social insects take care of the queen instead of having babies themselves.<sup>2</sup> Competition may be brutal at the level of genes, but there is no shortage of evidence that it is in genes' interest to promote behavior that cares for offspring, for relatives, and creates reciprocating social relationships. "Tend and befriend" fits neatly into a sociobiologic paradigm, and does not require modification of the basic theory. Animals tend their offspring, and practice reciprocity. Deviations from cooperation – infidelity, infanticide, cheating of all sorts, Prisoner's Dilemmas – are interesting, but not because cooperation is rare or unnatural. It occurs with mathematical predictability, as do less friendly alternatives.

Let me conclude by emphasizing that my gripe is minor indeed compared to my overall admiration for Dr. Taylor, her insights, her goals and her book. Congratulations are due!

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### Notes

1. Taylor, S. E., Klein, B. P., Lewis, B. P., Gruenewald, T. L., Gurung, R. A. R., and Updegraff J. A., Biobehavioral responses to stress in females: Tend and befriend, not fight or flight, *Psychological Review*, 107:411-429,2000.
2. Hamilton, W. D., The evolution of altruistic behavior, *The American Naturalist*, 97:354-56, 1963.