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BOOK REVIEWS

Elaine N. Aron. The Highly Sensitive Person – How to Thrive When the World Overwhelms You. New York, NY: Broadway Books 1996.

Elaine Aron's book is an outstanding resource for understanding the highly sensitive person (HSP). Aron is a therapist who identifies herself as highly sensitive and who specializes in helping others with these traits. Aron estimates that 20 percent of people are very sensitive in varieties of ways. On the positive side:

Most HSPs (compared to non-HSPs) are:

- Better at spotting errors and avoiding making errors.
- Highly conscientious.
- Able to concentrate deeply. (But we do best without distractions.)
- Especially good at tasks requiring vigilance, accuracy, speed, and the detection of minor differences.
- Able to process material to deeper levels of what psychologists call "semantic memory."
- Often thinking about our own thinking.
- Able to learn without being aware we have learned.
- Deeply affected by other people's moods and emotions. (p. 10)

HSPs may also find silence, solitude and meditation great comforts and may be more open to spiritual awarenesses.

On the negative side, many HSPs have a low tolerance threshold for strong sensory inputs, various foods, strong (especially negative) emotions, crowds and more.

What is *moderately* arousing for most people is highly arousing for HSPs. What is *highly* arousing for most people causes an HSP to become very frazzled indeed, until they reach a shutdown point called "transmarginal inhibition." (p. 7)

Most HSP children experience stresses at home and in school because there is limited awareness about how to deal with such sensitivities. The tendency is to view these as problems and to want to encourage HSP children to be 'normal.' Adults may find similar problems at work and with friends and family. Doctors and various therapists may pathologize HSPs. HSPs may become shy and may feel insecure because they are not understood by others and don't understand themselves.



This is an enormously helpful book for HSPs and for anyone who wants to understand them. Elaine Aron has further excellent resources on her website. <u>http://www.hsperson.com/</u>

Book review by Daniel Benor, MD Editor, IJHC

Bernie S. Siegel. A Book of Miracles: Inspiring True Stories of Healing, Gratitude and Love. Novato, CA: New World 2011. 294 pp. \$19.95

This is a heartwarming gem of a book – everything one would expect from a publication of Bernie Siegel. These are stories collected by Bernie Siegel from people who experienced wholistic healings of body, emotions, mind, relationships and spirit. The healers included other people, cats, dogs and bats, synchronicities, prayers and deep inner guidance.

It is inspirational and heartwarming to read of a rescue cat who turned out to be a healer for a child with difficult behaviors; people who found inspiration and inner guidance to transcend their illnesses – putting more life in their days, even though they could not put more days in their life; and the frequent compliments to Bernie Siegel for bringing hope and healing into their lives.



Book review by Daniel Benor, MD Editor, IJHC

David Abram. *Becoming Animal.* New York, NY: Pantheon Books-Random House 2010. 313 pp. HB \$26.95

This is a remarkably rich book that shares David Abram's awakening to deeper levels of awareness of broader levels of reality. Abram shares his journeys of awakening to ever deeper layers of awareness of his connectedness to the world around him and to his inner resonations with All that IS. Much of the book is written in prose poetry.

Most spiritual journeys begin with a curiosity, an inner itch that draws our attention to scratch below the surface of our awarenesses. Abram asks:

What if thought is not born within the human skull, but is a creativity proper to the body as a whole, arising spontaneously from the



slippage between an organism and the folding terrain that it wanders? What if the curious curve of



thought is engendered by the difficult eros and tension between our flesh and the flesh of the earth? (p. 4)

Abram truly loves connecting with the natural world and revels in the realms of nature. He has enjoyed long hikes, excursions and sojourns on various parts of mother earth. This book is a journal and mind-film record of some of his outer and inner journeys

While persons brought up within literate culture often speak *about* the natural world, indigenous, oral peoples sometimes speak directly *to* that world, acknowledging certain animals, plants, and even landforms as expressive subjects with whom they might find themselves in conversation. Obviously these other beings do not speak with a human tongue; they do not speak in *words*. They may speak in song, like many birds, or in rhythm, like the crickets and the ocean waves. They may speak a language of movements and gestures, or articulate themselves in shifting shadows. Among many native peoples, such forms of expressive speech are assumed to be as communicative, in their own way, as the more verbal discourse of our species (which after all can also be thought of as a kind of vocal gesticulation, or even as a sort of singing). Language, for traditionally oral peoples, is not a specifically human possession, but is a property of the animate earth, in which we humans participate. (p. 10-11)

He strongly advocates for accepting our oneness with all of creation.

D'you still want me to pretend that the rock moves you only mentally, or can we both admit that it is a physical, bodily action effected by the potent presence of this other being? Can we admit that your breathing body was palpably moved by this other body? And hence that you and the rock are not related as a mental 'subject' to a material 'object,' but rather as one kind of dynamism to another kind of dynamism – as two different ways of being antimate, two very different ways of being earth?" (p. 56)

Abram laments humanity's separating itself from its oneness with mother earth and all who dwell upon her surface – the animals, plants, rocks, waters and air from which we have distanced ourselves.

...in a civilization that has long since fallen under the spell of its own signs, the conviviality between the child and the animate earth is soon severed, interrupted by the adult insistence (expressed in countless forms of grown-up speech and behaviour) that real sentience, or subjectivity, is the exclusive possession of humankind. This collective insistence could not displace the compelling evidence of the child's direct experience were it not for all the technologies that rapidly come to interpose themselves between the child's developing senses and the earthly sensuous, enclosing her ever more tightly within a purely human realm. The broken bond between the child and the living land will later be certified, and rendered permanent, by her active entrance into an economy that engages the land primarily as a stock of resources to be appropriated for our own, exclusively human, purposes. (p. 42)

He warns of the dangers facing us if we continue to distance ourselves from our oneness with all of the rest of the world.

It is only now, as we find both our lives and our high-tech laboratories threatened by severe fluctuations in the weather, as we watch coastlines disappear and foodwebs collapse and realize that our own children will not be exempt from the violence that our onrushing "progress" has inflicted upon the earth, only now do we notice that all our technological utopias and dreams of machine-mediated immortality may fire our minds but they cannot feed our bodies. Indeed, most of this era's transcendent technological visions remain motivated by a fright of the body and its

myriad susceptibilities, by a fear of our carnal embedment in a world ultimately beyond our control – by our terror of the very wildness that nourishes and sustains us. To recognize this nourishment, to awaken to the steady gift of this wild sustenance, entails that we offer ourselves in return. It entails that we accept the difficult mystery of our own carnal mortality, allowing that we are bodily creatures that must die in order for others to flourish. But it is this that we cannot bear. We are too frightened of shadows. We cannot abide our vulnerability, our utter dependence upon a world that can eat us. Vast in its analytic and inventive power modern humanity is crippled by a fear of its own animality, and of the animate earth that sustains us. (p. 69)

And he advocates for finding and rebuilding our connections with that inner gnowing that we are one with all that surrounds us.

...as soon as we question the assumed distinction between spirit and matter, then this neatly ordered hierarchy begins to tremble and disintegrate. If we allow that matter is not inert, but is rather animate (or self-organizing) from the get-go, then the hierarchy collapses, and we are left with a diversely differentiated field of animate beings, each of which has its gifts relative to the others. And we find ourselves not above, but in the very midst of this living field, our own sentience part and parcel of the sensuous landscape. (p. 47)

What if there is, yes, a quality of inwardness to the mind, not because the mind is located inside us (inside our body or brain), but because we are situated, bodily, *inside it* – because our lives and our thoughts unfold in the depths of a mind that is not really ours, but is rather the Earth's? What if like the hunkered owl, and the spruce bending above it, and the beetle staggering from needle to needle on that branch, we all partake of the wide intelligence of this world – because we're materially participant, with our actions and our passions, in the broad psyche of this sphere? (p. 123)

This is a superb book, to be savored and re-read several times. You may be happier reading this as an eBook because Abram's vocabulary is wonderfully rich and may include words you need to look up in a dictionary.

Book review by Daniel Benor, MD Editor, IJHC

Nuclear Roulette: The Truth About the Most Dangerous Energy Source on Earth

Saturday, 29 December 2012 00:00 By <u>Mark Karlin</u>, Truthout | According to Chelsea Green, the publisher of the new book *Nuclear Roulette:*

Each new disaster demonstrates that the nuclear industry and governments lie to "avoid panic," to preserve the myth of "safe, clean" nuclear power, and to sustain government subsidies. Tokyo and Washington both covered up Fukushima's radiation risks and - when confronted with damning evidence - simply raised the levels of "acceptable" risk to match the greater levels of exposure.

Nuclear Roulette dismantles the core arguments behind the nuclear-industrial complex's "Nuclear Renaissance." While some critiques are familiar - nuclear power is too costly, too dangerous,



and too unstable - others are surprising: *Nuclear Roulette* exposes historic links to nuclear weapons, impacts on Indigenous lands and lives, and the ways in which the Nuclear Regulatory Commission too often takes its lead from industry, rewriting rules to keep failing plants in compliance. *Nuclear Roulette* cites NRC records showing how corporations routinely defer maintenance and lists resulting "near-misses" in the US, which average more than one per month.

Truthout interviewed the book's author, Gar Smith:

Mark Karlin: The first part of your book covers 14 arguments against nuclear power. Let's talk about a couple, starting with one that is a bit inclusive of most of the others. What are the catastrophic dangers of nuke plants that you detail in Chapter 4?

Gar Smith: Atomic energy is impractical on many levels. Nuclear power has proven too costly to survive without massive government support and taxpayer bailouts. Nuclear power is inherently unreliable because reactors must be regularly shut down to replace used fuel assemblies. Reactors also experience "unplanned shutdowns," which means they can be offline more than 10 percent of the time. In 2011, the NRC's own records revealed at least 75 percent of US reactors were routinely leaking radioactive tritium.

Nuclear reactors are not energy efficient. They produce far more heat than they can possibly use. It takes as much as 500,000 gallons of water *per minute* to keep these plants cool. Even then, around two-thirds of the heat is wasted and needs to be spilled into nearby waterways or into the atmosphere. A reactor is like a sports car built to travel 600 miles per hour in a world where the speed limit is 60 mph. To operate it safely, you need to have your foot on the brakes - at all times. And good luck if the brakes fail.

The world now has experienced three catastrophic events in three decades - with explosions, fires and meltdowns at Three Mile Island, Chernobyl and Fukushima. Add to that the increasing number of accidents as aging reactors in the US and around the world continue to crack, leak and fail. Whether the industry likes it or not, it is inevitable that nuclear accidents are going to increasingly make the evening news.

Mark Karlin: We hear so much nuclear industry talk of new and improved reactors. What is the reality behind that claim?

Gar Smith: While there are new designs, as yet, none of them have been built or fully tested. Most of the so-called Generation IV reactors will probably *never* be built. The new AP1000 reactors under construction in Georgia and South Carolina have fundamental design flaws that prompted the former chair of the NRC to vote against granting them a license. Construction of Georgia's two AP1000 Vogtle reactors (supported with billions in taxpayer-backed loan guarantees) has been plagued by shoddy construction and second-rate building materials.

In addition to the proposed new reactors (which would operate at temperatures two to three times greater than existing plants), the Department of Energy is providing funds to kick-start something called a small modular reactor. These "mini-nukes" could be housed inside a two-car garage but would probably be placed underground. Dispersing these small reactors across the landscape would increase security risks, magnify supply-and-transportation hazards, and do nothing to reduce the danger of reactor accidents and routine releases of radioactivity.

Let's be clear: nuclear plants don't generate electricity. They produce only three things: vast amounts of heat (which is used to spin the turbines that generate electricity), radioactive fallout (in the form of

"permissible" leaks that have been linked to thyroid tumors and childhood leukemia) and tons of radioactive garbage.

Recently, nuclear power has been promoted as a clean alternative to fossil fuels, but even if atomic power were carbon-free (which it is not), relying on nuclear to eliminate even *half* of the world's climate-warming CO2 emissions would require building 32 new reactors a year. That's not gonna happen.

Mark Karlin: In the 50s and 60s, there was a large European and United States anti-nuclear movement that included massive protests against nuke bombs and plants. What happened? Nuclear power hardly is in the news anymore except when there is a meltdown such as at Fukushima.

Gar Smith: Well, many of those protests were staged to halt construction of new reactors. Once the reactors were up and running, the protests lost their purpose. As to the general lack of critical news, that could have something to do with the fact that the major networks are corporate and have consolidated to just a few over the years. Their interests are corporate.

When the fallout from Fukushima reached the West Coast, the public was assured that the iodine-131 in the rainwater had a radioactive half-life of "only" six days. But if you really want to know how long an isotope remains hazardous, multiply the half-life by ten.

Mark Karlin: Truthout recently ran an excerpt from *Nuclear Roulette* about industrygovernment public relations to promote nuclear power. How does this manifest itself?

Gar Smith: A nuclear engineer once observed: "Nuclear power can be safe and nuclear power can be cheap. Just not at the same time." The nuclear disasters in Pennsylvania, Ukraine and Japan all demonstrated a common response from industry and government - a pattern of hubris, denial and deception. The basic premise is that the technology will never fail. When it does fail, you deny a problem exists. Finally, when the problem spins out of control, you resort to deception to avoid accountability.

Following the Fukushima meltdowns, the White House falsely assured the public the fallout would not reach the US. The Environmental Protection Agency then failed to release evidence that its RadNet monitors detected radioactive iodine and cesium in West Coast rainwater. In Japan, when radiation levels rose above "safe" levels, Tokyo responded by raising the "allowable" exposure to radiation. The US did the same. The US has cut back its monitoring of fallout from daily detection to quarterly tests. With the Fukushima meltdowns still not contained, this is indefensible.

Mark Karlin: What is President Obama's current position on nuclear energy development?

Gar Smith: It was George W. Bush who tried to create a so-called "nuclear renaissance" by expediting the reactor licensing and promising the industry billions of dollars in government handouts. President Obama initially outdid Bush, offering to double the amount of the government's nuclear bailout. While Obama has made important commitments to funding renewable energy programs, he still remains wedded to the nuclear lobby. Fukushima provides the most egregious example.

<u>Mark Karlin</u> is the editor of BuzzFlash at Truthout. He served as editor and publisher of BuzzFlash for ten years before joining Truthout in 2010. BuzzFlash has won four Project Censored Awards. Karlin writes a commentary five days a week for BuzzFlash, as well as articles for Truthout. He also

interviews authors and filmmakers whose works are featured in Truthout's Progressive Picks of the Week.

Read more: <u>http://truth-out.org/opinion/item/13600-nuclear-roulette-the-truth-about-the-most-dangerous-energy-source-on-earth</u>

You can learn more about **the most dangerous energy source on earth** by reading Nuclear Roulette. Receive a copy from Truthout with a minimum contribution.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb. *The Black Swan – The Impact of the Highly Improbable*. New York, NY: Random House 2007.

Nassim Nicholas Taleb is a Lebanese American author and scholar who focuses on problems of randomness, probability and uncertainty. He is a professor at Polytechnic Institute of New York University and Oxford University.

In this book, Taleb focuses on our enormous discomfort with uncertainty and on how we like to fool ourselves into believing we know more about predicting the future than we actually do. He uses the metaphor of the 'black swan' for the unexpected events that appear in our lives – as when we may have encountered only white swans in our experience and therefore predict that all swans are white, ignoring the possibility that we could ever encounter a black swan. Taleb postulates that this denial of the possibility of the unexpected may actually invite the unexpected to occur.



What is surprising is not the magnitude of our forecast errors, but our absence of awareness of it. This is all the more worrisome when we engage in deadly conflicts: wars are fundamentally unpredictable (and we do not know it). Owing to this misunderstanding of the casual chains between policy and actions, we can easily trigger Black Swans thanks to aggressive ignorance – like a child playing with a chemistry kit.

Our inability to predict in environments subjected to the Black Swan, coupled with a general lack of the awareness of this state of affairs, means that certain professionals, while believing they are experts, are in fact not. Based on their empirical record, they do not know more about their subject matter than the general population, but they are much better at narrating – or, worse, at smoking you with complicated mathematical models. They are also more likely to wear a tie (p. xxv).

Taleb points out that we have a huge preference for gathering facts as a way of dealing with our discomforts over uncertainty. We prefer to rely on the expectation that past situations will be reliable predictors of future ones.

We do not spontaneously learn that *we don't learn that we don't learn*. The problem lies in the structure of our minds: we don't learn rules, just facts, and only facts. Metarules (such as the rule that we have a tendency to not learn rules) we don't seem to be good at getting. We scorn the abstract; we scorn it with passion (p. xxvi).

The Platonic fold is the explosive boundary where the Platonic mindset enters in contact with messy reality, where the gap between what you know and what you think you know becomes dangerously wide. It is here that the Black Swan is produced(p. xxx).

We reinforce our beliefs by studying history, where the facts of what occurred are evident, and authoritative historians assert that they occurred because of whatever rules and processes they believe have caused the events to unfold as they have. While such explanations appear to be tidy analyses of how past events unfolded, there are often too many uncertain factors playing upon current events for us to be able to predict which will be the most influential.

Worse yet, we strongly prefer to focus on facts and events that confirm our pet beliefs and theories.

Once your mind is inhabited with a certain view of the world, you will tend to only consider instances proving you to be right. Paradoxically, the more information you have, the more justified you will feel in your views (p. 59).

Our explanations then help us make sense of our world that is full of uncertainties.

Explanations bind facts together. They make them all the more easily remembered; they help them *make more sense*. Where this propensity can go wrong is when it increases our *impression* of understanding (p. 64).

The more you summarize, the more order you put in, the less randomness. Hence *the same condition that makes us simplify pushes us to think that the world is less random than it actually is* (p. 69).

We treat ideas like possessions, and it will be hard for us to part with them (p. 144).

It is tough to make predictions, especially about the future. - Yogi Berra

This is a marvelous book for helping us to appreciate the enormous complexities of our world and for being cautious in assuming we can understand our present condition or predict our future.

We humans are the victims of an asymmetry in the perception of random events. We attribute our successes to our skills, and our failures to external events outside our control, namely to randomness. We feel responsible for the good stuff, but not for the bad. This causes us to think that we are better than others at whatever we do for a living. Ninety-four percent of Swedes believe that their driving skills put them in the top 50 percent of Swedish drivers; 84 percent of Frenchmen feel that their lovemaking abilities put them in the top half of French lovers (p. 152-153).

Taleb advocates what he calls a "black swan robust" society, meaning a society that can withstand difficult-to-predict events.

Book review by Daniel Benor, MD Editor, IJHC

Jeremy Rifkin. The Empathic Civilization – The Race to Global Consciousness in a World in Crisis. New York, NY: The Penguin Group 2009.

Jeremy Rifkin is an American economist, writer, public speaker, political advisor and activist. Rifkin's work explores the potential impact of scientific and technological changes on the economy, the workforce, society, and the environment.

Rifkin believes that an acknowledgment of empathy as an important aspect of human awareness and relationships can bring greater healing into the world. He points out that while much of the literature on empathy has focused on resonating with the struggles and feeling the pains of others, empathy can perhaps more productively involve connecting with their joys. However, later he appears to contradict himself:



Empathetic consciousness would be strangely out of place in either heaven or utopia. Where there is no mortal suffering, there is no empathic bond. (p. 168)

In this tome, Rifkin makes a strong case for the benefits of teaching empathy as a healing intervention. He cites many studies to support this suggestion. For instance, an interesting experiment involved

... Dymph van den Boom, professor of general pedagogy at the University of Amsterdam, conducted an elegant study to assess the importance of nature versus nurture in attachment behavior.

Critics have long argued that babies who exhibit irritability from birth are less likely to create secure bonds and more likely to be anxious at the end of their first year. To test the assumption, van den Boom studied one hundred babies who had been diagnosed as highly irritable at birth. These infants were not only far more difficult than smiling babies, but they also were born to low-income families whose parents were uneducated and stressed by their dire circumstance and less likely to exhibit the patience and calm attentiveness required for their newborn to become securely attached.

The hundred pairs of children and mothers were divided in half. One group of mothers received three counseling sessions of two hours each between their babies' sixth and ninth months to deepen their sensitivity to their babies and the efficacy of their care. The other mothers received no counseling assistance. The results of the counseling were dramatic. Of the mothers who received counseling, 68 percent of their children were categorized as "securely attached" at one year old, while in the control group only 28 percent of the babies were categorized as secure. So while critics are right that irritable babies are less likely to become securely attached as suggested by the low rate of success in the control group, counseling of mothers upped the success ratio to nearly 70 percent. (p. 79-80)

Rifkin points out that our brains are wired for empathy. When we are in the presence of others who are expressing their emotions, there are 'mirror neurons' in our brains that are activated. In other words, we are wired to resonate directly with expressions of others' emotions rather than responding through cognitive awarenesses that then trigger us into feeling these emotions. We don't think to

ourselves, "Johnny is sad" and thus stir our own emotions to sadness. What happens is much more direct. We feel Johnny's sadness because our emotions are directly

We learn to sharpen our empathic awarenesses and responses through roleplay. By putting ourselves in others' shoes, we explore what they may experience and how they may feel. Up to this point, I resonated quite positively with Rifkin.

Rifkin observes that brain size correlates with the size of social groups in a species. I started to feel myself at odds with him at this point, as he appeared to be elevating humans above all other species. Then he writes,

We are finding kindred spirits among our fellow creatures. Suddenly, our sense of existential aloneness in the universe is not so extreme. We have been sending out radio communications to the far reaches of the cosmos in the hopes of finding some form of intelligence and caring life, only to discover that what we were desperately seeking already exists and lives among us here on Earth. This discovery can't help but awaken a new sense of communion with our fellow beings and advance the journey toward biosphere consciousness. (p. 104)

I also found myself in synch with some of Rifkin's further observations:

Faith-based consciousness and rational consciousness share a disembodied approach to existence. But it's the very feelings and emotions they discount that allow human beings to develop empathetic bonds and become fully mature social beings. Without feelings and emotions, empathy ceases to exist. A world without empathy is alien to the very notion of what a human being is. (p. 142)

Empathic extension is the only human expression that creates true equality between people. When one empathizes with another, distinctions begin to melt away. The very act of identifying with another's struggle as if it were one's own is the ultimate expression of a sense of equality. One can't really empathize unless one's being is on the same emotional plane as another. If someone feels superior or inferior in status to another and therefore different and alien, it becomes difficult to experience their plight or joy as one's own. One might feel sympathetic to others or feel sorry for them or take pity on them, but to experience real empathy for another requires feeling and responding "as if" you "are" that person. In an empathic moment, there is no "mine" and "thine," but only "I" and "thou." Empathy is a communion of kindred spirits, and it's elicited in a temporal and spatial zone that transcends distinctions based on social status. (p. 160)

I strongly disagree with Rifkin's apparent views that physical death is the end of the line for consciousness. Despite this limited awareness in the spectrum of life and rebirth, his messages and thesis remain strongly positive and helpful.

Empathy...transcends death in a very different way – not by representing the temporary nature of embodied experience but by acknowledging it, in all of its fragility, and then living life to its fullest. The drive for perfection gives way to the quest for self-realization. Instead of running away from life, one attempts to optimize it. (p. 167)

And again, I find myself in agreement with much of his further discussions:

Since we are continually counseled that greater wealth increases our chances of being happy, people continue to pursue each additional increment in hopes of attaining more happiness, only to be disappointed. We assume that the erosion of our previous feeling of happiness is due to not yet

being rich enough, so we more rigorously pursue what becomes an ever more elusive goal, only to continue to lose ground – all helped along by a commercial marketplace pouring billions of dollars into advertising, marketing, and image creation to feed our addiction and keep the profits flowing. As obsession takes over, people engage in more expedient behavior, transferring everyone and everything into a means to further their own ambition to gain wealth and secure happiness. They cease to regard others as unique and special beings. By devaluing others, we become ever more isolated from the affections and companionship of our fellows. The only thing that appreciates in value is our sense of alienation. (p. 498-9)

There is much thoughtful wisdom in this book, which I warmly and empathetically recommend.

Book review by Daniel Benor, MD Editor, IJHC

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