

BOOK REVIEWS

BERMAN, MORRIS. *Wandering God: A study in nomadic spirituality*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000. 349 pp. Reviewed by Ilene A. Serlin

Don't you wonder, too, how things got so screwed up? Wasn't there a better time, when human beings were still connected to each other and to the earth? When life was real and meaningful, when living was an art form?

Maybe there was even a turning point, a time when things irrevocably changed. Numerous theorists have been unable to resist the seduction and have advanced theories about turning points in one individual's development, about turning points in history, about turning points in the history of ideas. For example, Riane Eisler (1987) finds a time beyond matriarchy and patriarchy in which men and women are equal and live according to the chalice of cooperation. Others describe the paradigm shift in terms of the cognitive shift from the industrial age to the information age (Jaynes, 1976). Still others notice that these shifts take place in patterns, and that these patterns form paradigms (Kuhn, 1970).

What is different about Morris Berman's search for the original sin is that he goes beyond conceptual models to emphasize the primacy of the body and the significance of the loss of embodied spirituality in the modern world. He wonders, in *Wandering God: a Study of Nomadic Spirituality*, how modern humans lost a sense of paradise in everyday life. How did spirituality get to be a "vertical" attribute which is projected upward, leaving a flattened world? Terms like "transcendence" and "heaven" indicate the Judeo-Christian bias toward a separation of sacredness as *above* and secularness as *below*. What Berman imagines, instead, is a spirituality of the "horizontal," of this earth and this existence. In *Wandering God*, he completes his trilogy (Berman, 1981; Berman, 1989) on the evolution of consciousness by tracing the separation of spirit from earth to the time when humans gave up a mobile and egalitarian life of hunting and gathering and became sedentary farmers and landowners. Their static and hierarchical structures contrasted with the mobility and physical consciousness of the warrior and a society of freedom. It is the loss of mobility, therefore, which is the key factor in the change of consciousness from the hunter-gatherer life to the agricultural life (Childe, 1925/1957). It is this loss, claims Berman, that brought about a rigid society with classes, fights over territory, warfare, and alienation.

Berman begins with a clear statement of the problem: that "'normal' life" for human beings today is not "'healthy'" and causes a "wearing down of the spirit" (p. 50). Overpopulation and the inability to move on when resources get scarce lead to conflict. This conflict is managed through mechanisms like "hierarchy, prestige (ranked society), religion and ceremony." In contrast, nomadic cultures are "nonaggressive, nonhierarchical, and nonterritorial" (p. 68). In these societies, the family is still the basic unit, and its members rely on sharing and face-to-face communication. Existing societies like the !Kung Bushman show that this structure is still evident.

This observation inevitably raises questions about the impact of the information revolution on human interaction and its relationship to the rise of meaningless violence

in modern life. Berman cites chilling evidence: For example, when Jane Goodall's chimpanzees were denied their mobility, they faced increasing conflict over resources, a breakdown of their social order, and a rash of killings between groups. Berman's search for the origins of violence is, for me, one of the most valuable contributions of this book. Showing the relationship between the scarcity of maternal attention, population pressure, and frequent births in sedentary societies to attachment disorders (Bowlby, 1958), Berman connects the resulting basic human insecurity to a drive for dominance and hierarchy. Deprivation of maternal body contact and breast-feeding leads to personalities organized around fear who create societies characterized by the "driveness and pervasive malaise of narcissistic cultures" (p. 94).

Using an impressive array of scholarship from archeology, anthropology, psychology, and history, Morris Berman calls for a revival of an embodied spirituality which can nourish us in this life. This calls for a resacralization of this world. Acknowledging that we cannot simply leave modern life and return to a literally nomadic life, Berman nevertheless identifies certain elements of nomadic life which could be useful today. These practices include attention to population control, gentler child-rearing practices, and moving beyond unitary and vertical thinking to paradoxical thinking and paradoxical being (p. 18).

The key to understanding paradoxical being has, for me as a dance therapist and psychologist, a familiar and welcome ring. It is movement. Berman says:

It is precisely the nomadic life (i.e., ambulatory) aspect of HG [hunter-gatherer] life that sustains the perception of paradox and the fluidity of mind that was lost when the human race sat down. . . . movement is the physiological substrate of the paradoxical experience, of embracing life as it presents itself, rather than exclusively through the filters of myth and ritual, which are mistakenly taken to be, in sedentary societies, the fundamental sources of aliveness. In this sense, HGs were the first phenomenologists, or "non-ists," if you will. (p. 81)

On a collective, global scale, the nomadic consciousness described by Berman can have great relevance to our contemporary consciousness, worldviews, and values which, especially in the West but increasingly everywhere, are characterized by an erosion of traditional values and a heightened sense of fragmentation and isolation. This insight came up in a conversation with editor Kaisa Puhakka (personal communication, October 1, 2001), who noted that we live in a neonomadic culture of unprecedented global mobility, with many people still clinging—often desperately and nostalgically—to values and meanings that are based on the sedentary agrarian institutions of the past. The nomadic consciousness described by Berman is fluid, focused in the present, and appreciates paradox. Such a consciousness may have something vital to offer to the contemporary high-tech culture of neo-nomads.

A related issue is the crisis of spiritual identity today. While a great deal is being written about uprooted cultures and difficulties related to bilingual education, intermarriage, alternative families, and assimilation, less attention has been paid to the stark consequences of spiritual uprooting. Fewer people can depend upon the familiarity of the neighborhood place of worship for sense of place and a feeling of home. Children

no longer feel at home in the church of either parent and cannot find their own spiritual homes. We need rituals for interfaith marriages, for the developmental stages of our children; we need open interfaith dialogue and pastoral counseling that helps people to discover their own spiritual path. Interfaith pastoral counseling would help people sort out basic issues of life meaning and purpose, belief systems, and practices.

Finally, re-embodiment spirituality means that you can take it with you. It becomes portable, a tool for the journey. You live it, you breathe it, you sacralize every moment, restoring paradise to everyday life. This insight takes us back to the original point of Berman's thesis: spiritual pilgrims today can learn from a study of nomadic people. Their "nomadic consciousness" is an embodied spirituality which can help us deal with the frantic mobility of life today.

Berman's plea for a re-embodiment and resacralization of the world is passionate, and his insights about the relationship between food production, child-rearing practices, class structure, role of conflict, existential despair, vertical spirituality, violence, and the kind of fluid consciousness that embraces paradox can provide rich food for thought for therapists, students, parents, and all those interested in the history of ideas, culture, spirit, and the challenges that confront contemporary Western and global culture.

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