,earning About Love the Hard Way

eborah Blum talks about Harry Harlow, the notorious primate researcher who transformed odern parenting.

/ Karl Giberson

ike all great teachers, Harry Harlow was sometimes thought-provoking and sometimes st provoking. At his best he was both. Knowledge, especially that special type that .uminates the mystery of our humanness, is a precious commodity. Who could have ought that picking up a child and hugging it was a magical act? Who knew that this mple natural gesture could strengthen a newborn immune system? Even now, a half :ntury after a detached Harlow first watched his orphaned primates clinging to their tificial cloth mothers, we don't understand the complex process that transforms emotional :curity into physical health. And, at a more profound level, we still do not understand the)undaries that we should erect around ourselves, as we contemplate the various ways that e live and love and learn in this most complex and mysterious world.

ne greatest teachers do not leave their students with answers. The greatest teachers leave eir students with questions of their own, questions that send them off into the lab, the)rary, the unexplored scientific wilderness on searches of their own. In this sense, Harry arlow was the greatest of teachers. His legacy lies not in the territory that he explored mself, although that was considerable. No, his legacy lives on in the vast unexplored ilderness where his intellectual heirs tramp about enthusiastically in search of their own ıswers.

&S: Tell me how you decided to write about primates. **_Deborah Blum:** Animal research about us. We're the number one species on the planet, more powerful than any other, and e take these animals out of their homes and use them the way we want to. So the :cisions we make in animal research say an awful lot about us. I really spent this last :cade doing biology of behavior and moving in and out of primate research because they e such a complicated interesting prism for a lot of issues.

&S: If we imagine somebody doing Harlow's research today it would seem terribly cruel.

the last few decades we've witnessed a number of delightful Disney pictures featuring imals, and we've got stories about monkeys being able to speak sign language now. In a nse they've become our lovable cousins. Were monkeys simply clinical animals to Harry arlow—and does that help us in defending his work? **_DB:** That's exactly right; he had an ntirely different ethic about animals. You can see the simplicity with which he made his cisions. How do we deal with the terrible social isolation of depression? In order to nderstand it, we need a model of isolated depression. Look at monkeys. They are social imals. That was his reasoning. Today you couldn't do those experiments because we look that bigger ethical picture. He's definitely a product of the past.

&S: And yet the fact that he was so comfortable generalizing his results to human beings eans that he did see that monkeys were very much like us. **_DB:** That's why I love him. e's a fabulous subject because he's so slippery and complicated and morally ambiguous. you read Harlow's research papers, they are fabulous, because they have an incredible notional punch to them. Monkeys are living, breathing beings in his papers. He nderstands how much they can suffer, and he goes ahead with his research anyway. And at's where you have to swallow and say, 'Ok, he has made this moral decision that these imals are going to suffer. He will occasionally say, 'This was incredibly painful to watch' 'We really destroyed these animals and we know it.' Even so, every animal was put rough therapy. He didn't recover all of them. Some of them died of pure misery. He's ch an unlikely standard bearer for the message of love. He makes you wonder, 'Just what e we willing to pay for knowledge?' But in his time the only way to really persuade ople how much affection mattered was this research. Am I willing to pay that much? Can say, 'Yes, I want this information, gulp, I'm willing to do this?' Or do I say, 'No, I uldn't even sacrifice these 16 monkeys to find out.'

&S: Is Harry Harlow typical for a male of his time? You describe him as distant from his wn children. Did that make easier for him to be distant from his primate subjects? **_DB:** some extent he's typical. This was a period in which it was perfectly acceptable for men ver to be home. At that time a male university professor had a blank check to live his job. nd Harlow had a really hard time building close relationships. Even though he loved ople, it seems he was never truly, fully emotionally attached with anyone. That emotional paration allowed him to put all of his energy into ideas.

&S: There's a scientific mythology that knowledge should be pursued for its own sake. nd there's a much more pragmatic view, that we can use this knowledge to make the orld a better place. If Harlow's goal was to transform the process of childrearing, his ork becomes more sympathetic. **_DB:** What he really liked to do was upset apple carts nd challenge dogma! The idea that monkeys can think, or children need love, was mpletely rejected by his profession at the time. He was a wonderful fighter, really good

taking an idea and powering it up. But he really believed that science is supposed to be ɜed. It matters; it should be part of everyday life. One of his postdocs called him a blue-ɔllar scientist. So when he took on the subject of love, he went out and talked to anybody ho would listen. And you see him say, as any good scientist would, "Well, if the mother-ıild relationship matters so much, don't others?" And he then goes on to study social ɔlation.

&S: For me, the most disturbing part of your book was the information about early ʻphanages. The number of children that died from mere neglect is terrifying. It made me ink, 'If Harlow's work did anything to mitigate the problems in these orphanages, then all ˙ it is totally justified. And why are animal rights activists coming out and saying ɔmehow he was cruel to a small number of monkeys, when in fact thousands of babies ere dying in orphanages from the same treatment?' **_DB:** His work definitely did change e way that we deal with children. Since the book has been published I've actually had ırses from different hospitals come and talk about their wards for orphaned children. One as a hospital in which they had used the same mattresses for so long, the mattresses had a ɔllow in them and the children just fell into the hollow, and could hardly turn their bodies. ll they ever saw was the ceiling. Harlow's work was this enormous wedge in forcing ɛople to admit that this didn't work. His work has illuminated all kinds of things in the ay we deal with kids.

&S: Scientific research is sometimes like being in a war, where people are dying and you ake decisions that in the heat of the battle seem cruel, but in the larger picture, you're ying to save lives. **_DB:** We take his research for granted now. We act as if, 'Hug your d, touch matters, love matters,' is something that came down on stone tablets with the ıwn of human evolution. We forget how hard people had to fight to get that idea through.

&S: This revolution in psychology is really very recent. Do we really understand it fully? m thinking back to when my daughter was born, in 1989, and she was whisked away by e doctor and they put a little wool hat on her head and put her in the nursery with all these her babies. We had to stand out there looking in. Should that baby have been in a room ith my wife and me? **_DB:** A healthy baby should be in the room with the parents. We're ɛtting this lesson really slowly. People from my parents' generation talk about how their others wouldn't pick them up because they were afraid that they would ruin them. I get ɛople who say, 'My husband thinks that I'm coddling our three month old baby. Is it OK? o you think I'm ruining him?' I don't think we've shaken off our ideas about this at all.

&S: You kind of need to have one generation die and the next one come along. Our world day is run by people that were probably raised in the pre-Harlow paradigm. Do you think at, as a new generation of children takes over— a generation that was treated a little more

vingly—that our world will change? **_DB:** Yeah, I do think that. Harlow said, 'Guess hat? Being there matters, and I'm not going to kowtow to any political stuff at all, I'm st going to tell you that that's part of your job.' People hated it, and I think some people ill hate it today. My parents are always saying to me, 'You're not hard enough on the ds, you're not strict enough on the kids,' or my mother's favorite, 'You apologize too uch to your children.' We are in this interesting evolution in the culture of parenting. ersonally, I'm really glad to be on this side of the revolution.

&S: Normally when scientific revolutions occur, they overturn common sense. When alileo was arguing that the Earth was moving, people said, "Well, no, that can't be it. It olates common sense." But Harlow's revolution is a return to common sense. **_DB:** ommon sense is a wonderful filter for science.

&S: Are there areas of science today where you see other moral ambiguities? **_DB:** cience is full of moral ambiguities. Take environmental science. It tells us that we should op destroying forests. Trees support all kinds of species and the long-term health of the anet, and we're clearing the map at an incredible rate. However, if you look at the ountries where the remaining large forests are, there are some very poor people who nnot survive except by forest destruction. So what's right and wrong? Psychiatric edication is another powerful example. If you are going to argue that violent aggressive haviors are biological in origin, and you want to fix those behaviors with drugs, do you nd up medicating the violence out of the poor and desperate? The intersection of science nd life is loaded with moral ambiguities. I love gray ethical issues, frankly, where there are o perfect rights and wrongs.