

*How did you happen to find yourself in South America living with a community of Stone Age Indians? Tell me the story.*

On my first trip abroad, as a good American girl from New York, I first went to France then to Italy where I was introduced to a blond, blue-eyed Count called Eurico. He was so successful with the girls that he had become extremely conceited. I would not have anything to do with him; except for the fact that he was soon leaving to look for diamonds in the South American jungle and had fascinating stories to tell about his adventures. As he was saying god-bye to his friends he suddenly turned and asked me: "Why don't you come to the jungle with us?" Even though I found him terribly arrogant the thought of the jungle was thrilling, so I immediately said yes. We had just twenty minutes before the train left, so we rushed to my hotel, threw a few things into a suitcase, rushed across this huge piazza, and jumped on the train, which was already pulling out of the station. It was very dramatic.

*It all sounds rather exotic, given your prim and proper background.*

I guess that being prudish was a crude form of idealism. But five and a half months in the jungle that first trip had its effect and I came out a very different girl. It was quite an experience for a sheltered Manhattanite, hiking through the jungle, meeting snakes and scorpions, sleeping in a hammock. Even though there were jaguars and crocodiles, the worst for me were the things that made you itch. Of course diamonds were the object—technically speaking. For me the attraction was the word "jungle." There was a kind of rightness that one missed in New York. That was what I was unconsciously seeking.

*The jungle represented something you felt was missing from your New York background. Can you reach back and help me understand this?*

As a child I was attracted to Tarzan and everything that had to do with jungles. It seemed to me—and this is, in retrospect, that there was something primal, something right about it. Tarzan represented a pure being, somehow before the fall. It was not the diamonds I came home talking about; it was the Indians and how they lived, what kind of lives they had and what the children were like. I was so drawn by this first experience that I made four more expeditions and on these we went into unexplored regions. The people we encountered were living in the Stone Age.

I suppose I was looking for what I found and shouldn't have been so surprised when I found it, which wasn't until the fourth expedition. It was then I realized that I had unlearned a great many assumptions that I had about human nature.

It became clear that we have made a terrible mistake about what human nature is. We are under the misapprehension that we're born bad, or in the official words of the Church of England, *innately depraved*, and that is simply not true.

*Let's go back. You said that you started to have a series of insights.*

I was taking my assumptions apart, thinking, "gosh, if this isn't true then that isn't true." I was living for more than two years with these Indians, looking straight at them and not really seeing them, because I was so blinded by preconceptions. I didn't even notice that, amazingly, the children never fought. They played together all day unsupervised, all ages, from crawling, to walking to adolescence. Not only did they not fight, they never even argued. This is not at all what we have been taught human nature is—*boys will be boys*. So I thought well maybe, *boys won't be boys*.

It was a long time before I began to notice what was before my eyes. One thinks well, these are savages. They wear red paint and father loincloths, so they're not people. But their exactly the same species as we are, except they are behaving the way we all evolved to behave. We, on the other hand, are mistreated as infants and children, treated inappropriately for our species.

As a result, we keep re-creating an anti-social population. Nobody's born rotten. You just don't have bad kids. It's not true. There is no such thing. But we can make them bad. Ironically, the reason it's possible to make these profoundly social animals bad or anti-social is because we are so social. Our parents, our tribesman, our authority figures, clearly expect us to be bad or anti-social or greedy or selfish or dirty or destructive or self-destructive. Our social nature is such that we tend to meet the expectations of our elders. Whenever this reversal took place and our elders stopped expecting us to be social and expected us to be anti-social, just to put it in gross terms, that's when the real fall took place. And we're paying for it dearly.

Just imagine the neurotic and psychopathic people that we have become. Why do we have a 50% divorce rate? Why do we have so many police? It's not just Americans; it's the whole of western civilization laboring under a misapprehension of what human nature truly is. That's what I learned from my experiences.

One of my later partners, a Belgian, when he saw the little Indian boys running around with their bows and arrows, whooping and jumping, used to say as a joke; they were playing Indians. The fact is, no matter how roughly and wildly they played, it was never antagonistic. Very rarely did they have accidents and there was no supervision by adults.

Children, three, four and five year olds would carry babies around all day. No one was saying, "Sit here and you can hold the baby while you're sitting down," or, "Watch out." Very small children are trusted to take care of infants because; five minutes ago they were babies themselves. They just know how to take care of babies.

Here we are, great big grown-up louts in our twenties or thirties reading books about how to take care of babies. I'd be embarrassed to admit to the Indians that our women don't know how to take care of their children until they read instructions written in a book by a man, a man they've never met. The Indians wouldn't have any respect for me. If you were there, you wouldn't either.

In the jungle every man, every woman, every child knows how to take care of babies. I don't mean to be disrespectful to our *experts*. They may be able to distinguish a measles from a mump, which is very useful if you have one or the other. But that doesn't, for one minute, give them deep knowledge of correct human behavior.

Researchers faithfully try to document what is *normal*. Nobody I know really wants a normal child. Just look at normal. It includes what's called the terrible twos, which are sort of wild, bossy tantrum-prone con-men. Luckily they're small otherwise we'd really be in trouble. And we've got God knows what kinds of drudgery and alienation for children and parents.

We use the word *normal* as though it were a synonym for *natural*, which it is not. Normal is how we *think* children must be. This includes things like three-month colic, where babies are constantly vomiting. They call it spitting up so it doesn't sound like a real illness, but it is an illness. It's painful. This happens even when babies are drinking their mother's milk. They're throwing up. There are contractions and a lot of pain.

How can we believe that we alone evolved over millions of years without being able to digest our own mother's milk? Why are *normal* babies so stressed that they can't keep their food down? The babies I saw in the jungle never had indigestion unless they were ill with a fever. Babies never threw up. They were not wriggling and struggling and arching and flexing and squeaking like ours do *normally*.

*Are there other examples of the difference between natural and normal?*

We oppose the baby from the start, coached by experts and the society around us, not by our own feelings. We wage a war of wills: the baby is hungry and cries and we say no, it's got to be four hours between feedings.

Studies show that the butter fat content of mammalian milk indicates that it is the human baby's nature to nurse approximately every twenty minutes... and obviously the baby is supposed to be in the mother's arms where the milk is available.

When the baby is first born things are stuck up its nose and down its throat to clear them. Then it's weighed and measured, which isn't doing it any good at this very sensitive moment. For what, the Bureau of Statistics?

What the baby needs is to be in its mothers arms, and the mother even more so needs to have the baby in her arms to share this beautiful moment of falling in love, which is exquisitely choreographed by hormones.

Even if logically, we aren't interested in this total stranger who we just caused pain, who isn't very cute at that stage anyway, it is our nature to fall madly in love with it and to put it's life above our own.

If you were exhausted after giving birth you could say, "oh well forget it. Just drop that little stranger in the river. Or just leave it there for a minute. I'll be back later," at which time the wolves might have gobbled it up .

It's very important to have this great moment of falling in love, known as bonding. It's built in because it has to be for our survival. It has to have been there for us to become the successful species we are, successful meaning that we survived.

Today *normal* is *adversarial*. The baby arrives and has an innate expectation that it will be among trustworthy allies. That's not what happens. From the baby's point of view he or she feels like they're not on my side.

"Whatever I want, they say no. I want to be with my mother. I want to be close. I want to be safe. I want to be with someone alive, who's breathing and warm and smells right and feels right and who touches me and helps me feel my own flesh appropriately, not a lifeless box with a lifeless cloth. I don't want to hear myself screaming in my own ears, and hear other people screaming around me and get no response. When I scream I expect something to happen. Not just to scream but because I'm waiting. I'm expecting something and it doesn't come and I scream until I'm exhausted."

So normal is adversarial. I hope people realize that what they're doing with all the love in their hearts, and I have no doubt of that, *is* adversarial. When you're following the advice of the doctors or the experts or your mother-in-law, your mother or your sister or whomever; when you are feeding the baby on a schedule, denying it physical contact, not allowing it to sleep with you and be with you, twenty-four hours a day, not less, then you're being adversarial. It's perfectly clear that the millions/billions of babies, who are crying at this very moment, want unanimously to be next to a live body. Do you really think they're all wrong? Theirs is the voice of nature. This is the clear pure voice of nature, without intellectual interference.

The baby knows what it needs, and the minute you put it down, it cries. It's letting you know. It's signaling you perfectly clearly, "don't put me down!" And we have built into us equally, without a dictionary, the knowledge of what it means when the baby goes "waa, waa, waa." We know it means, "pick me up. Don't put me down. Don't leave me!"

*Until very recently doctors routinely performed operations on babies without anesthesia. The baby screams but the trained professionals deny it feels pain! How can mothers deny their own innate wisdom? How can we have drifted so far off?*

It's easy to see how this normal but unnatural behavior perpetuates itself. When a baby girl is born and her mother doesn't answer her cries, she feels that she has no power to signal and summon help. Unfortunately, human nature is such that she cannot blame the parent. So she feels she's not good enough, not lovable enough, "I haven't done the right thing. I'm not worth responding to." This is universally the reaction of babies. They feel that they haven't got it right or they're not good enough because they're so social, ironically. They believe in the authority of their elders, their parents. If parents don't come, they feel that their instincts—to cry—wasn't right. They don't know anything else, and it doesn't work.

As they grow older and look under blades of grass to see what's growing, or cutting up worms, or tasting things, and they hear, "don't do that, no don't do that, bad, naughty." Their faith in their own instincts are constantly undermined. Don't touch that, you'll hurt yourself. Don't get up on that, you'll fall. If babies were allowed to trust and develop their innate wisdom and intelligence they wouldn't fall into the swimming pool. They wouldn't dream of it.

*Let's talk about trust. How could we have gotten to this place where when the baby's screaming we deny our natural innate tendencies to respond and pick it up? Both in the medical field and as mothers?*

Our faith in our own instincts is undermined right from birth. The first job we have on Earth, which is dictated innately, is that of an explorer. We go around sniffing and tasting and touching and looking at everything. And people say don't touch, it's dirty; don't touch that; be careful, you'll hurt yourself; don't do that, you'll break it—all of which constantly undermines our feeling of competence, our trust in our instincts.

When you get to school people say, "sit still, fold your hands, don't talk to your neighbor."

Whatever children are doing—is learning. They're learning like little sponges, all the time. But they're told, "Stop it because this is worthless. What is important is this. Pay attention. 'A' is for apple." Everything else is undermined and pronounced worthless. "A" isn't even for apple. It could be for aardvark, it could be for God knows what, anything you like. But they arbitrarily tell you that "A" is for apple. Nothing else counts. And they persist. All your authority figures tell you that your nature, which is to explore, is worthless. If *they* don't *teach* you, it's not learning.

I've recently come to the startling but obvious conclusion that learning occurs naturally, but teaching isn't natural at all. I can't remember ever seeing any of the people I'm talking about, who live so successfully, *teaching*. The little ones are learning from the older children or from the adults, but nobody's teaching.

They're learning on their own initiative, which is so powerful. You don't have to augment it. In fact you can't really augment it. There's no way you can make a child learn better than he would if he or she wants to.

By the time we have our first child, we're so conditioned not to believe our innate feelings that we have total strangers in the hospital tell us what to do and we don't know any better. It's tragic. We have an exquisitely evolved innate knowledge of how to do things. Mothers know that the baby should not be taken away at birth but they have been so conditioned to believe in an *authority* and not themselves, that they deny their own wisdom.

*We've described normal. Let's contrast it with examples of what you would consider natural.*

Natural means that babies are never left physically alone. Not at birth, not ever. The idea of isolating a baby and letting it cry is wrong. When you think about it, during the time we evolved, which covers millions of years, we have always been held by somebody. As pre-humans, as hunter-gatherers, through the beginning of agriculture, we were never left alone. And if we had been, we might have been gobbled up by crocodiles or bears or wolves.

Babies need to be in the arms of their mothers, certainly for the first few days, or weeks. Not very long afterwards babies are handed around to others. And everybody loves to take care of babies. Children love to take care of babies. This is a powerful impulse which we recognize by giving them dolls to play with. Small children love to play with dolls and they love to take care of babies. In fact they're extremely good at it. They haven't learned how to do it wrong the way we have. They instinctively do it right.

*How did you see this illustrated in the jungle?*

I remember one little girl, three or four years old, sitting in a hammock, swinging back and forth with a great chubby baby in her arms all day, except when she took the baby to the mother to nurse. She was singing, *yeoquanta, yeoquanta, yeoquanta*, the Indian word for baby. If she wasn't sitting in the hammock she'd be running around with the baby and doing something else, not paying attention to the baby but doing something else and carrying the baby with her.

This results in a rich experience for the infant in arms. It's getting a feel for the pace and the activities and the way things are and the sounds and the sights and the temperature changes and all the different things that compose the life around it.

It's an important phase, what I call the in-arms phase, before it starts crawling, when a baby cannot discharge its own excess energy. I'm not talking about any new age thing called energy, I'm talking about the physical energy, the difference between being dead or alive. If you broke your leg skiing, had it in a cast and couldn't move, you'd get pretty twitchy and irritable after awhile just because you couldn't discharge your excess energy. That's what I'm talking about.

A baby whose energy is not being discharged for it by the person carrying him, is in that twitchy, irritable state. This is a principal contributor to the stress that produces colic, the indigestion, the arching and the flexing. When a baby moves and kicks in this kind of spastic way you can see that it is uncomfortable. It's trying to expel this uncomfortable energy.

Babies in the jungle, in Bali and other such places are carried around by active persons, discharging the energy field for both of them. Their muscle tone is soft, they're not tense. They don't make squeaking sounds. They make soft sounds because there's no tension in the throat.

The idea that babies are fragile is also simply not true. They're incredibly un-fragile. The more action there is, the more jumping around and leaping about and seeing things, the better the baby likes it. We see this when we have a baby sitting on our knee and it starts doing giddy-up actions.

What a baby really needs is an active person, active not simply with baby care, which I don't think is a legitimate activity, but doing something else. Doing grown-up work, just lugging the baby along so the baby can be in the middle, to watch and learn.

*In your book you wrote about a child being right near a hole, or a pit, but the adults had no fear that it would fall. Can we develop that theme?*

We act as though human nature were something to be afraid of, to constrain, modify or fight; to subdue and overcome. Somehow we have gotten away from believing that we evolved in a way that works. We believe that our nature has to be modified, opposed and controlled from the very beginning.

Our nature, like that of every other animal, works fine the way it is. But we do not trust human nature. We distrust it in infants, in children, and in ourselves.

I saw a beautiful example in the Yequanda village of *Wanania*.

I witnessed a man named *Tududu* inventing the playpen. Here he was in the Stone Age and like a good Flintstone he invented the playpen. He went out and cut logs and brought them back and started to construct this thing. He lashed two square frames together over some poles and made a Flintstone playpen. Then he took his son, *Cananasiniawana*, who was about one year old, who had just started to walk the week before, and plunked him into it. Proudly the father stood back admiring his handiwork. *Cananasiniawana* just looked around and saw that he was trapped and let out a huge scream of protest. He was horrified. He screamed and his father didn't for one-minute think, he'll get used to it. Which is what we would do. The father didn't justify or rationalize: What does he know? He's only one year old. He'll be safer this way, and blah, blah. His father heard the child's screams of horror and realized instantly that he had made a mistake, that his invention was not suitable for a child. Then and there he broke the thing up and threw it away—the wood was green and couldn't even be used for firewood. This is the trust I'm speaking of; the difference between us and them. We wouldn't consider the child's view at all. We'd say he doesn't know it, but this is his or her best interests; he'll get used to it.

These Stone Age mothers and fathers know the voice of nature when they hear it. And they respond to it. Nobody in that village would have done any different. They respect the voice of nature. A baby doesn't have any other voice.

*The baby near the pit, do you know who that was?*

It was the same family. They had dug a pit to get mud to make the walls of their house. Into the pit they had thrown branches and sharp sticks. It had rained and was partly filled with water. *Cananasiniawana* was taking his first, clumsy steps. He would go to the edge of the pit and sit down and then stand up and fall on his bottom, but he would never fall into the pit. Whenever he fell it would be the other way.

Puppy dogs and kittens don't appear to be falling somewhere on purpose, but they don't fall into the fire do they? They don't fall into the pool do they? We trust puppies and kittens not to burn themselves up in fires but we don't trust our own children.

We pride ourselves on being so intelligent and yet we feel that we are the only species whose children are so stupid that they're going to throw themselves into fire, out of windows and into swimming pools.

We are the only animal that doesn't follow it's mother, how can this be? Because we keep showing our children we expect them to run away. Whereas people in the jungle have their children follow them around like other animals.

The point is trust. We are paying a terrible price when we do not trust our human nature, which works beautifully when we do. When we don't trust it, our expectations are inappropriate for ourselves and our children.

First we tell them how bad they are and then tell them to be good. What we're really saying is that they should pretend to be good. If you thought someone was good you wouldn't need to tell them would you? The neighbors are coming to tea or we're going to kindergarten and you say to the child, now be good.

It means pretend to be good because we know what you really are – bad. The message goes straight to the heart of the child, to his feeling, where his self confidence is being formed. What is formed is a feeling that I've got to learn to hide what I am. I'm bad. I'm antisocial, but I'd better try to look good to get by. This is an uncomfortable and very inefficient way to behave.

There's an interesting example, an American baby called Donovan, who was on a trip that I took to Bali a couple of years ago. This baby was just a year old. He was crawling along the edge of the hotel swimming pool and Lisa, his mother, like most good loving American mothers, was constantly next to him, putting a hand out as though he were going to fall into the pool.

And I said, look, let's just do this if you can bear it. Let Donovan manage the pool himself and don't be near him. We'll all watch him out of the corners of our eyes and he will get the impression that he's on his own. Let's just see what happens. Bravely she did it.

Donovan backed toward the edge of the pool and put one chubby little leg in. He couldn't get the other down so he pulled that one up and then he'd put the other one in and he wriggled around. He couldn't really get much of himself into the pool but he was trying all these different things, which is exactly how children learn to be agile and competent when left on their own.

At a certain point he saw a little wall which was slightly submerged, dividing the shallow part from the deeper part. He lowered himself onto it and crawled along by himself, something his mother would never have allowed, and he got to the middle where there was a fountain. He pulled himself up and began playing with the water, near the top. He was having a great time and was extremely competent. Lisa was in the deep part of the pool, out of sight. As far as he was concerned, nobody was watching him; he was doing all this on his own. Suddenly Lisa appeared about three feet away. He took one look at her and started to cry and regressed to the helpless infant that she'd always treated him as. "I can't do anything. Help me, mommy." You could see him regress into the helplessness that his mother kept him in because of her lack of trust.

*Does this lack of basic trust permeate our entire culture?*

In the broadest terms we have lost trust in our own essential nature. We don't just mistrust children, we mistrust ourselves. We mistrust human nature itself. The reason I'm always talking about babies and children is because this is where the mistrust first manifests itself, where it is formed. But I'm talking about all human beings. I'm talking about society as it is.

Society is unpleasant, dangerous, unhappy, alienated, and unstable because in childhood our nature, being confident, joyous and loving has been undermined and we simply live the way we are expected to. What we believe is what we make our experience into. And what we believe is what we have been taught to believe by our parents and our experiences.

*Let's go on to non-adversarial childhood. Help me understand what you mean.*

I'm always working with clients on themselves and very often we work on their relationship with children—how they can deal with them as well as trying to repair their own feelings about themselves. It's important to do both. What I invite them to do is something I call non-adversarial child care. It's difficult for even the most loving parents to stop being adversarial.

When first told that they are adversarial, a parent will say, "Oh no I'm not. I adore my child. I'd do anything for him. I spend all my time doing things for him. I cook and wash for him and spend all my time following him around." But what they're doing is following them around all day adversarial, saying don't do this and don't do that. That's not an ally, that's an adversary.

That's someone who's opposing. They say, "Well you've got to teach them discipline." Well no, you don't have to teach them discipline it turns out. All you have to do is expect them to behave socially and they do.

If they have been treated with respect from birth, if they've been carried around and slept with every night and handed around to other people, but always been in physical contact, been in the middle of the action, in the middle of life, without being paid attention to, they don't need attention. In fact they don't want attention. They want to be able to pay attention to you. They want to be your satellite. They don't want the parents to be their satellite.

We think we're good parents if we wait on the children. Bring them their ice-cream and put on their clothes for them and carry things for them. I've got a couple of rules. One is never do anything for a child that it can possibly do for itself, even if it takes a while longer.

Because every time you do something, not only do you give the child the message that it's inefficient or incompetent, but you're actually preventing it from learning; from having faith in its own ability to accomplish and figure things out. Let them figure it out. If it gets up onto a sofa or a chair and it can't figure out how to get down, leave it there until it can. It will try one leg and try another, it will figure it out. Or you might eventually give it the next step, helping with one step but not the whole thing. Give the child the message from the very beginning that you expect it to figure things out for itself.

Don't be centered on the child all the time. It gives the child the feeling that you don't know what to do because you're constantly saying would you like mommy to do that or would you prefer daddy do that? It drives children mad.

What they really want is to feel calm inside knowing that its parents know what they're doing, without asking me, because I'm just a baby. I don't want have to tell you. I want you to know what to do. And then I want to watch what you do and see you working and see you talking to other people and see you doing the different things that you do so that I can take it in. This is my way of learning.

And then when I'm ready, I will imitate you because this is my natural impulse. "You don't have to tell me now you do this and you do that. Just leave me alone and I will start helping you. You'll see."

The simple principle I came to understand is that what happened to us—the negative experiences that we had in infancy and childhood—are no less traumatic than the positive experiences that we expected to or should have had and didn't. The residue of those *bad* experiences and missed *good* experiences is in the form of beliefs; that we can never do anything right, or we're not lovable. Or we have to take care of everyone. These beliefs are instilled in us in infancy, before we're able to judge anything. We cannot look in the mirror and say; "well I'm a nice little girl. I've got all my fingers and toes and I'm a sweet little thing. I'm intelligent and charming and I got a little pink party dress and I'm just fine." We can't do that. We can only get our feeling of worth about ourselves and everything else from our authority figures. And this is what children do. They take the authority of these people and believe it. Whatever it is. This becomes the basic feeling we have about self and also about the relationship between self and other.

*How can we empower children and then later adults to trust their nature?*

We don't need to empower children to trust their nature. The tendency to trust is there. We simply need to allow them to do so. Another rule is; never do anything to a child that will make him feel badly about himself. But we do this all the time. We do it with words and we do it with looks.

Touch the Future  
The Continuum Concept  
Allowing Human Nature To Work Successfully  
Jean Liedloff  
A conversation with Michael Mendizza

There are two ways we treat our children. One is the punishing/blaming: "you are very bad, go stand in the corner or I'll spank you." The other is permissive: "that's perfectly all right darling, if you want to walk on mothers face she doesn't mind." We don't know any other way. The more correct way is what I call information. If you thoroughly understand that children are innately social, then you understand that what they want is information. You don't have to be angry to tell them what's needed. You just let them know. The idea is not to blame, and not to praise, because both are insulting. Expect children to do the right thing. You then are being a clear model and there's no conflict. It's the way nature designed us to behave.

END

Jean Liedloff lives in Sausalito, California, near San Francisco, on a houseboat which she shares with her two cats. Her work includes speaking engagements and consulting with people to help them apply the principles of *The Continuum Concept*— not only for parenting, but also for recovering from the adverse effects of a modern, "non-continuum" upbringing. Many of these consulting sessions take place via telephone, and she has clients from many countries and may be reached by telephone at (415) 332-1570. (The best times to call are between 9 AM and 12:00 noon, or between 5 PM and 9 PM, Pacific time zone.) *The Continuum Concept* is Liedloff's only book.