

Nicole Hess

November 13, 2023

Hi Leda, I wanted to share some of my thoughts about John. I actually wrote this over a week ago and was editing it before sending, but I waited too long. I'm so sorry I waited. I imagined him reading it while recovering, and I tried to have it read as a maybe-slightly-fun account of my intellectual arc, which was 99% inspired by John and you (and Don). I hoped it would make him chuckle. I'll always remember John's warm chuckles in response to ridiculous evolutionary reasoning, and in response to discussions of the consistent follies of human behavior. Apologies in advance for length; I like to be thorough. Nickie

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I'll begin in 1989. I was 15, a Gen Xer thinking about big picture questions, a student at Beverly Hills High School, sitting in history class. My World History teacher (widely regarded as one of the meanest teachers at Beverly) was lecturing about something forgettable. But at one point she slowed her speaking and took on an especially serious expression. She held up her manicured hand in front of her face with all fingers extended. She folded down her pinky, then ring finger, then middle finger, leaving the last two positioned in a crab claw. "This," she affirmed, "is evolution," and she told us that in the future all humans would retain just a pincer grip. I'd always been a bit skeptical of the information presented in my classes (except math), but this seemed especially off. Having rejected supernatural ideas (including the Catholicism that my ancestors still wish I'd return to), I was looking for a more reasonable account of the world. Why are we here? What is the meaning of life? Why are we like this? Why does everyone seem to default to furthering suffering in the world? I decided to take AP Biology to learn more about the potentially reasonable evolutionary account of life. Unfortunately, I'd gotten a B+ instead of an A in 6th grade biology, so I was not allowed into the AP class. In one of my grandest "I'll show them" decisions, I enrolled myself in night classes at Santa Monica Community College, taking Intro Philosophy, as well as Human Biology. My exhausted mom, struggling to make ends meet, had to drive me to campus at night, on top of all the other driving she did at multiple jobs to earn enough to pay the rent. I think she drove me because she liked seeing me challenge authority.

I got As in my night classes, and continued to take them. But by day my brain was wasting away in high school. I learned about a way to get out of high school, the now-defunct California High School Proficiency Examination. It was the easiest test I have ever taken—questions where you'd look at the nutrition label of a can of soup, and answer how many grams of protein it contained. I passed, quit going to high school, applied for and was accepted to the Santa Monica College Honors program. I choose classes I actually wanted to be in: Biology, Anthropology, Philosophy, and Psychology. In one Psych class, taught by a wise, retired psychiatrist, we viewed a film (on VHS tape) about the origins of Earth, then the origins of life on Earth. Dr. David Phillips explained that, to understand anything in psychology, we needed to understand the processes that produced the mind.

Fast forward a few years of working part time at multiple jobs as a secretary, clothing sales girl, and bank teller, I found myself choosing classes for my first quarter at UCLA. One was Joe Manson's Primate Behavioral Ecology class, Anthro 128. He had us read *The Selfish Gene*. And

now I knew *The Meaning of Life*. He showed us how the behavior of nonhuman primates could be understood by quantifying aspects of behavior and comparing the measurements to ecological variables. We read about callback experiments in monkeys. So next I took Experimental Design in the Psych Dept. The logic and purity of experiments called to me. Then I went to the Costa Rican jungle to study howler monkeys. I left early. I don't like being in the outdoors (though reading about it is great!). The next quarter, Joe offered Anthro 124, UCLA's EHB class. Joe's class had a thick reader, and in it were the first chapters of *The Adapted Mind* by Tooby and Cosmides. I used to stay up all night studying in the UCLA hospital cafeteria (hanging out with my plasma physicist boyfriend while he spent 10 hours doing one math problem). Those nights, your words gave me a coherent explanation of the links between the forces that shape every other living thing on Earth, and the varied but predictable social highs and lows that we all experience daily in life. This joyful, exploratory time was the major turning point in my intellectual life. Here I was eating out of vending machines among hardcore med students (not exactly my tribe but they were ardent and that's how I felt too), in a hospital cafeteria at 3 in the morning, finally understanding why we are here, why we think the way we do, the meaning of life, and why we all seem to be competing. I very carefully read and reread those early chapters in *The Adapted Mind*.

Apparently, no one else in Joe's class did. Most Anthro majors angrily rejected evolutionary accounts of human behavior, instead favoring blank slate reasoning that prioritized this great, powerful-and-yet-vulnerable, wholesome, sentient being: culture. Later I took a class that Doug Jones was guest-teaching. That's where I really saw how cultural and biological anthro students were fiercely anti-EHB. Doug spoke so clearly and convincingly, using data, just like Joe did, and yet many in the class thought the data were erroneous, even fraudulent, and always misinterpreted (and yet none of them seemed to use science in their critiques—just gut-level repulsion that humans could be reduced to biological explanations).

Then I learned of an upcoming day of talks at UCLA—the talks had to do with culture (okay) and humans and evolution (awesome!). Tooby and Cosmides were presenting! I got to put faces to *The Adapted Mind* chapters. You were both so clear, persuasive, and logical. You were a little hard to hear because the large auditorium was filled beyond capacity. You gave profound yet understandable answers to the deepest questions. You synthesized knowledge from many disciplines into the evpsych framework. And yet here you were, two real humans, humble, willing to engage with nonacademics in the audience, and able to give solid answers to ill-formed questions. I was standing in the back of the hall with a friend I dragged from her campus (Loyola Marymount U) to see you guys talk. I recall some overly harsh tones in questions from the audience, and you handled them with grace. You made me feel—and this is something I truly value—like I had an ingroup. Most of my educational experiences showed me some very clear outgroups (even within the bioanthro program at UCLA.)

So I was interested in female competition (based more on observation than experience—I was no match for the girls in Beverly Hills—I just watched and tried to learn.) I knew a big part of female competition, and cooperation, probably had something to do with mate competition. Don

Symons was at the same place as Tooby and Cosmides, and UCSB wasn't too far from my mom and grandparents in LA. No one in my family went to college, or even really knew grad school was. I didn't fully know what I was doing applying to grad school, but I needed to learn more about this rational approach to understanding the social world. I had little to lose by trying, and wasn't going to disappoint anyone if I didn't achieve academic excellence. Shockingly, I got in to UCSB (also U Texas Austin, but UCSB was my first choice).

I moved from home to Santa Barbara. I TAed a lot—for Don, Nap, and the Psych Dept's experimental psych class. I started dating Ed. He told me I should go to lab group. I was shy and felt unworthy (I was a Don student, not really a valid CEP student). But I went and you didn't question why I was attending. Along with marrying Ed, coming regularly to lab group was the best part of my 20s. In lab group, we all had the same interests, valued the same perspectives, and appreciated each other's life observations and interpretations. We spoke the same language and understood the same humor. You made me feel so welcome. I have a complicated family situation (as you know), but since lab group I've always known I was a part of an intellectual family that I cherished. When I see Leda, Deb, Danielle, Michelle (and the males too) from CEP at HBES, I feel a strong sense of acceptance and ease.

John, you in particular made me feel so included in our local CEP and broader evo community. When you asked me present in lab group the first time, I was elated (and terrified—I tried to look strong while up there at the overhead projector). I had these ideas about competing women and girls, and a little bit of data, and you took my ideas seriously. And sometimes I'd say something about my experiences or perspectives, and I saw that you were listening, and I felt like my ideas had merit if John and Leda were listening. Once I said something about always being surprised when things (living and nonliving) 'work.' Like when I turned the key and my car reliably turned on. You took notice of that. I still wonder what you were thinking. First, does he think that was a dumb thing to say? Also, does he also wonder at the seemingly improbable functioning of engineering and nature? And—it's not just me—John and Leda view these mundane sentiments as the interesting parts of human psychology.

More recently, with this family stuff I went through, you wrote me that kind email with your thoughts, and you shared your family experience, and your observation that evpsych people seem to have had more unusual family experiences. I don't think I responded enough to it in my email reply (I'm sorry about that), but it really meant a lot to me. For a genius, you have a big heart and you are remarkably attuned to other peoples' emotional states. I plan to ask more colleagues about their family experiences (gently) because this really got me thinking.

When you and Leda wrote Ed and me a note on our wedding card, you said "You're a good match." I still hear that in my head when I'm doing daily life stuff with Ed. For example, when we are sitting watching our evening sci fi shows, pausing every few minutes to chat about the plot or characters, predicting what will happen next (I usually win), and loving doing so—"we're a good match!" comes to my mind. John and Leda think we're a good match, so it's true. Your

opinions mean so, so much to me. No one has gotten things more right, or said things better, than you and Leda. Okay maybe Don too.

Another thing Ed and I do comes from watching you and Leda. Every time we go to a conference, we bring back a gift for each kid. I remember you doing this for Nike, so she would know that she is still #1 in your mind when you are away from her, as a dad off on a hunting venture would do in the EEA. I don't know if I can even begin to explain how much my parenting strategies are based on what I saw you and Leda doing with Nike when I started at UCSB. She was born a month after I moved to Santa Barbara. You had careers but also invested massively in your offspring, and used your evolutionary expertise to inform your parenting decisions. Nike came to lab group—your family life was a part of your intellectual life. We do a lot of that too. Today our girls are astute ethologists who aren't afraid to apply their reasoning to humans. It feels meaningful to have that kind of connection with our kids, and it's also a lot of fun (though sometimes we have to shush our younger one when she makes a sociobiological claim about sex differences in a public place).

I know I'm not your smartest or most accomplished student. I tend to care more about understanding things myself than disseminating my findings. Also, my personality is not well-suited to be a fierce, ambitious academic. Also I (very sociobiologically) prioritized my kids at the time in life where I could have been career building. It was a tradeoff I chose. I hope I can still do good research once my 2nd offspring is “done.” I plan to do more *good* experiments, hopefully more cross-cultural work in Central Africa (when it becomes safe to go back), inspired by the elegant experiments I first read about in *The Adapted Mind*.

In terms of caring about making anyone proud, I don't really have relatives to impress. They are just thrilled that people have to call me “Dr..” But once both kids are done, I intend to make you, and Leda, and Don, proud. I don't think I've done it yet, but that's the plan for the 2nd half of my life. Also, once I get my next (and last possible) promotion as a Career-Track faculty person, I promised Deb that I would be a regular reviewer for EHB. In reviews I typically try to properly reframe sometimes quasi-evolutionary studies in UCSB-style evpsych terms. These young people don't know their history!

I'll add a note about Ed here. Ed has his own arc with UCSB evpsych. He started out as a Nap student, and came to UCSB a hardcore physical scientist by training. Early at UCSB he took the required sociocultural grad classes (he started as a sociocultural, not biocultural, student). He was being taught that everything, everything, everything was socially constructed. He did all that tedious reading of failed theories by early social and cultural anthropologists, and had a good grip of what they were saying. He heard that you Darwinians were saying something else, and was ready to come to lab group to argue. Don Symons guided/nudged him to read some papers first (yours among Williams and others). Ed had his epiphany: Aurrgh, they're Right! So he changed his thinking and went fully evpsych. As you know, Ed has since published and given a lot of talks on the “problems” that pomos and others (even other biological anthropologists!) have with evpsych. For example, he gave a talk at the Brazil HBES last year trying to bring

clarity to psychologists who thought evpsych could not be true because of a vague concept of “epigenetics.” He made some converts in Brazil. In his undergrad classes here at Washington State University, to quote one student Ed overheard talking to another, “Have you noticed that what we’re learning in Dr. Hagen’s class is the opposite of what we’re learning in all our other classes?” If I remember correctly (at HBES Boston among lab group alums), I joked that Ed was “Tooby’s Bulldog,” and John chuckled.

Much, much love and appreciation,
Nickie
Nov. 13, 2023

Oh wait one more thing: I want you to know that I also felt very protected, as a female grad student. I know that women in AABA, and some at HBES, have complained about harassment. I had a very different experience. At one point I was ready to go to the Solomon Islands with a new hire (the “Nap replacement,” laughable that he could fill those shoes). I got a grant to fund this fieldwork. The new hire said some things that made me feel potentially unsafe, so I cancelled going. He threatened to report me to Grad Division for backing out, and to tell my committee about my bad choice. But my committee supported my decision! You didn’t push me to rush to the field and take risks to prove myself as a tough anthropologist who should live up to the standard of traditional male fieldworkers. You always knew that women have equally valuable (and even more interesting!) research-relevant capabilities, and all along you showed that you appreciated those capabilities in me. Thank you for supporting me in that.