



Hilary Bradbury & Bill Torbert: Eros / Power

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Hilary Bradbury is a scholar-practitioner focused on the human and organizational dimensions of creating healthy communities. A professor of organization studies since 1998 (Case Western, USC and OHSU), she is editor-in-chief of the international peer reviewed *Action Research Journal* (Sage Publications). She was named 2018 Jubilee Professor at Chalmers Institute of Technology, Sweden. Hilary was born and bred in Dublin, Ireland and educated at Trinity College after which she attended the Divinity Schools at Harvard and University of Chicago. Her PhD from Boston College focused on organizational change and transformation toward a more sustainable world. Her latest books include *Eros/Power: Love in the Spirit of Inquiry* (Integral Publishers, 2016, with Bill Torbert) and *Cooking with Action Research* (2017, with AR+ Associates). Hilary, who has served as a member of the teaching circle at Zen Center of Portland, brings an eye to integrating Eastern meditation with the work of sustainable social transformation.



Having received both his BA and his PhD in Individual and Organizational Behavior from Yale, Bill Torbert served as Director of both the War on Poverty Yale Upward Bound Program and the Theatre of Inquiry. He also taught leadership at Southern Methodist University, the Harvard Graduate School of Education, and then, from 1978-2008 at the Carroll Graduate School of Management at Boston College, winning local and national teaching awards. At BC he served as Graduate Dean (the MBA program rising from below the top 100 to #25 during his tenure). He consulted to dozens of companies, not-for-profits, and governmental agencies and has served on numerous Boards. He has also published widely, based in part on the Global Leadership Profile psychometric measure of leadership development, and articulated the Collaborative Developmental Action Inquiry paradigm of social science. In 2014 he received the Chris Argyris Career Achievement Award from the Academy of Management.

Serge Prengel, LMHC is the editor the *Relational Implicit* project (<http://relationalimplicit.com>).

For better or worse, this transcript retains the spontaneous, spoken-language quality of the podcast conversation.

Serge: So there's something both very exciting and very scary about this topic and we're taking the plunge.

Hilary: And it's winter and so we're going to get cold when we go in, but it is, it's exhilarating, this topic. Maybe to start us off. I want to throw in some big things that are coming to me through, through my heart, as I think about this for me: the question on sexuality, the question of how our inquiry -- and we'll get to some

definitions I hope in a few minutes -- but these are really at the heart of remaking democracy and I feel that that's what's going on for us in the current moment.

It's just a really big time that our creativity, which is so deeply anchored in our body, gets to come out, and then we get to do that in partnership, women and men together as opposed to talking about each other with frustration. And of course that's what makes it so scary, exhilarating and scary.

Bill: Yeah, it's interesting because when I was 20 years old in the early sixties, there was no simple form of birth control. People were still not supposed to engage in sex until they got married. Um, I remained a virgin for a long time and I was scared to death of the demand on boys to take the initiative with girls. And I can well imagine that for some people that fear gets transformed into a kind of assertiveness or aggressiveness. But I remained afraid for the most part. Then the sexual revolution opened up in front of me in my mid and late twenties and the first blush of feminism, of women -- at least in the university environments that I was mainly involved in -- were, it seemed, instantly liberated and very confident of themselves, it seemed to even it all out and make it easier.

And besides, I was trying to learn how to exercise mutual power. I thought I was really good at it and actually found out what the woman wanted to do when I was with her. It wasn't until much later, um, when AIDS came about and when a more critical form of feminism developed -- and I'm leading right up to the last few months -- that I began to realize how much I still had this privilege, even though I was trying to act in a mutually equalitarian way. I had tremendous institutional power vested in me partly as a white man, partly as a professor at a university, and as a sort of well known consultant, coach and so forth. I mean I knew that intellectually, but I didn't understand emotionally the degree to which this might work the environment I walked around in, and might make women more inclined to say, or to appear to say 'yes' more than 'no.' So now I'm 74 years old. I'm too old for the game, but I still am left with this sense of fear and uncertainty and a realization that I didn't take into account class and gender and institutional factors -- the large collective factors that influence people's feelings about who has power. And it was alive, I wasn't good at seeing the shadow really until Hillary began getting after me as we were writing our book Eros/Power together, as anyone who looks at it will see. There are repeated critiques by Hillary of my obtuseness. (She gradually got through.)

Hilary: Yeah. Thank you. Thank you. But you know, 'Was will das Weib,' a famous man was once asked that question. And I think for me, I have so appreciated the conversation with Bill kick-starting something that I now bring to many relationships, the understanding that when we had this sexual revolution in the sixties -- and I was born in the late sixties -- we started this revolution, the idea that women were kind of cast out from Patriarchy and Patriarchy was somehow over. And now we're going to find our full selves inside of conditioning. Deep, deep millennial, old conditioning. And we're just going to cast that off. So. So Bill's comment about how we fooled each other. And we have been fooled. I think ourselves and women now. I feel that I, I'm certainly one of them. We're actually allowing ourselves the gift of finding out

what is it we actually want with one another because we're also understanding that men have been deeply inside of patriarchy, this inability to talk about their emotions, this inability to feel often sending them towards women to feel women's bodies, to feel women's emotions, right?

And then women in turn having to be agents inside this, this container that we've received. So literally, that's bringing our first big word 'inquiry,' which doesn't sound terribly sexy. I think is one of the most important words, to our creativity, to our sexuality, because we begin to ask ourselves and inquire with our bodies with one another. What fun! What is it we actually want as opposed to these terrible stories we've been given about power and power over and sexism, right? So sex is genuinely meeting each other and myself such that we can arise as creative beings together. But what a marvelous, marvelous gift and opportunity.

Serge: So, what I'm hearing you saying in this, where the connection between both of us, that Bill was also mentioning before about the sense of pressure that he felt, and in a way this is about being imprisoned into roles and expectations and that the alternative to that prison in which we can feel really disconnected from ourselves and in a role of 'performing' is actually the mechanism of inquiry, of connecting through a sense of curiosity, of wanting to know each other and have a way of creating the space for connection.

Bill: Right. But that's extremely difficult because the inquiry involves becoming vulnerable, becoming aware of one's own actual feelings which include feelings like, gosh, I don't want to be rejected. So asking this question is dangerous. I might, I might be told 'no.' When I called the eighth grade girl that I was somehow drawn to at that time and asked her to come to the class dance with me, she said, 'no, I have already been asked.' And, I just lost it completely, put the phone down, rushed down to my mother's lap and wept. Previously my self concept wouldn't, couldn't accept that. Even 10 years later in my early twenties, the idea of actually talking directly about what I felt and how the other person felt and having an ego capable of tolerating the response was difficult. I apparently fooled myself by becoming a professional about talking about feelings. But it was easy to talk about some kinds of feelings and easy to help other people talk about their feelings. But there were qualities, the qualities of feelings around sex were in fact very difficult to talk about.

Serge: Yeah. So, so what you're pointing out is that the real crux of the matter, the difficulty is in being able to tolerate the vulnerability about being rejected, about not being accepted, about not being wanted.

Hilary: Yeah. But there's a little bit more, I think, for, for women also historically. So we're talking about fear dynamics here, shame dynamics, and they're incredibly paralyzing for both women and men. What is added to it for women, I think is this digital fear. It's a fear that so many of us are now saying to each other, yeah, I was harassed, I was attacked. I think I listed for myself one time was a whole page (of times I'd been harassed), and then I just kinda gave up from the age of nine on. So how pervasive this is, how dangerous this is. And so as a man is coming through his conditioning to feel his vulnerability, a woman actually is coming through her conditioning and

vulnerability is kind of a tricky thing because a woman is almost conditioned to be vulnerable but in a, in a kind of, in a bad way. Right?

So, so this inquiry is, is different and we can hook each other. And so we have to create spaciousness and safety with each other. But also for ourselves. I will mention to be concrete about it, the book that we wrote. I don't think it's so easy to just sit down and, you know, everybody do this. I myself was in psychoanalysis for many years. If you include in the years of writing about this, about this material, and I think creating a spacious container for the self, some kind of mindfulness practice is really good to allow the vulnerability or the shame to actually be felt. Because it's such a lie. I know that you're a psychotherapist and probably know this better than me, but it's such a sticky and disgusting emotion.

It's designed to make us run away from it, right? So to invite ourselves to relax into those levels of shame... I also have a kind of a mystical understanding of what we're up to. It's not just me, it's not just Hilary, it's not just Bill. If anything, we're kind of breaking through the mists of time quite honestly to begin to talk. The conversation is actually rather simple. The breaking through is really, really, really difficult because you know why? Because our body has been shut down around this stuff. God bless me. I grew up as an Irish Catholic and, and Bill an American. Who could have thought such a marvelous patriarchal bruises as these.

Serge: But, so you're talking about that sense of what's really difficult is to confront the embodied experience of shame and so in a way of older pressures and habits of society, and the experiences that feel demeaning to people hearing you at your worst, it just creates something that is very present in your interactions with men.

Hilary: Yes, absolutely. But by the way, I think there's relationships with, with women as well, issues of power. I think Bill and I have been thinking about this primarily through the question of how do we transform power relationships and sexuality? Is there a part of that that is also a catalyst for this kind of social transformation at least as, as I think about it.

Serge: Turning points... Shaped by power...Into something that allows for more mutuality and that has been pretty much the theme of your life work.

Bill: Over the years, working with developmental theory and then gradually realizing that each developmental action-logic has its own definition of power and that all of the early action-logics we grow through, power is thought to be unilateral in nature. It's only at the late action-logics that one begins to recognize that there's a far greater power in mutuality, that in fact people can't be transformed by force, they can only transform when they are cooperating with somebody else's playing a feedback role with them in some way or other, or some environment that's catalyzing that. So yes, it has been my life's work to think about mutual power and how it can be used. But of course, most of our institutions are still lodged at the early action-logics. And just as there are relatively few people to guide us in a work of trying to develop ourselves, there's even less exemplification of a late action-logic organization or institution.

Some of the ones that we most hope are that kind of institution, such as spiritual teachings, often have turned out to have their own huge shadow of sexual presumption by the master and teacher. One of the most searing three day experiences I had, and Hilary was there, was in the company of about a little more than a dozen and a half of us men and women, in which my role in the group was one of the main contentious issues. I felt myself being stripped by the feedback I was receiving, partly because I had brought these people together precisely in order to create a mutual power situation. So how could they blame ME when I didn't have any particular power role in the group? Of course I had brought the group together to begin with... So again, I was being a little blind, but we need situations like that in senior executive teams. We need people to receive that kind of harsh feedback. As a normal part of business you might say. I have been with one or two executive teams that have really made breakthroughs in terms of talking about differences in power and different kinds of power that are being used and how that, how the women looked in term of their use of power and how the men look in terms of their use of power. I have seen circumstances where that kind of conversation has happened; but they seem to be so rare.

Serge: I want to reconnect to something you said earlier when you were speaking and referring to 'action-logic.' I want to maybe just find a brief definition -- like, my understanding of it would be like a world view, an embodied world view, an all-encompassing whole person worldview that corresponds to each stage of development. Is that what you have in mind?

Bill: Yes, yes, very much. In a way, the early action-logics are played out throughout society. I mean, we talk about the Opportunist. It's appropriate to be an Opportunist as a young kid. When I was trying to learn how the world works -- when you push this lever, what happens? You boss your father and mother around because they're supposed to be helping you. And then there's the age of the, what we call the Diplomat action-logic, where instead of bossing everybody around, we suddenly realize it'd be better to cultivate their attraction to us and we try to act attractively in groups. We don't want to get negative feedback because that would just undo us, because we depend upon other people's approbation.

And then there's a movement to the Expert action logic where one realizes all this emotional stuff is making it harder to make any decision. I want to have some kind of model of the world that permits me to act rationally. Some people try to, you know, use accounting or marketing or sail boating or any other craft as, as their guide in life as to how to do things right. Then there's the Achiever level, and then one suddenly realizes, oh, I have a world view. The world isn't exactly the way I assumed that was, um, and I can change my worldview. That's a fairly unusual, sophisticated place to get to. But in a way, the whole world is coming into this, into this Redefining action-logic now, because nobody can live in their own tribe without being engaged with other tribes. So your assumptions about what's right are coming into question all the time. So, we're being pushed up the developmental scale by, by worldwide development, uh, but maybe not fast enough.

Serge: As I'm hearing: Individually we have these stages of development, but also as a broad society, we also have them. And so, in a way, the crisis that we're experiencing in terms of sexual harassment, sexual relations is at the same time and opportunity to actually renegotiate the old rules. I'm shifting from unilateral in a sense of power. I don't have, I won't have power unless I assert power in some different way; the way to have power is through the negotiation and mutuality.

Bill: Right. And if I can add something more there, I think that one of challenges for the #MeToo movement, and now maybe the Time's Up movement is that women have to be careful not simply to start using the power of their visibility and have the opprobrium that comes to the men who are identified as being more coercive power users in their relations. Women have to be careful not to gloat too long or think that the issue will be resolved simply by this outpouring of witnessing of inappropriate behavior. That's an important first step. But a men have to be drawn into learning behaviors and women to women have to be careful not to say I have some unilateral power, I'm going to use it. And that's very difficult because somebody has been powerless and they feel more power. It's very easy not to think too long about what kind of power we are using. So, the timing of how this movement develops is going to be extremely important. And it's going to be incredibly important to invite men in and to, and to have men begin to take visible roles in working with other men as well as with women.

Serge: MMM. Yeah. Hilary?

Hilary: Yeah, it's tricky. It's tricky. It's interesting that Catherine Deneuve had something to say about this this morning as well. And at the same time, timing is everything. There may need to be a time for a social marinating in what is being said. I mean, it's literally just a few months old. Feminism itself is really critical feminism is really just a few decades old. You know, I just did jury duty. Women didn't sit on juries in the state of Oregon until I believe the 1960s. Can you believe that? We used the word 'tribe' earlier on, you know, sometimes I wonder are women and men -- we can think of ourselves almost as different tribes -- it's as though our evolution is a little different and we're each kind of gaming and other. And so the, the decks of evolutionary, biological markings on us is really very, very strong.

And, and so I think we have to, we have to honor that. And this need -- I tend to define power, less as coercion, which is classically how social scientists do. I like to start with a definition more out of philosophy because I, I come more from that. I always loved how Nietzsche spoke about it, or Paul Tillich talks about it too, this idea of self expression. It brings us back to ourselves rather than seeing power or something that, this poor little lacking self needs. So, if I can begin to feel powerful, I become creative. I will probably want to tear the other down an awful lot less. So I think we have to admit to ourselves our sense of lack and then try to take care of that. In other words, we need to do our work here and we need to do it fast. There is this part of me that feels, we're being given this opportunity to upgrade the action-logic, to upgrade ourselves as a species, as a whole tribe together at a time when our technology is so profound. Really powerful. I mean, we could literally be looking at the last generations. It's a big deal.

Serge: You're talking about the shift from thinking of power in terms of 'I don't have power and I have to try to find a way to act on, to find coercion, either on other people or on the environment.' But in order to exist, basically 'I exert power therefore I am,' versus a sense of, 'Oh, I feel this sense of power radiating from me.' You know, 'I exist, therefore I have power,' from that place of 'I exist, therefore I have power.' It is possible to negotiate with other beings who have also that sense of 'I exist, therefore I have power.'

Hilary: My longing becomes I want the other to have power too because I have this deep longing to co-create, to create something with, with the other. Just by the way, I've been inspired by Bill's work to think more about relational action-logics, understanding that we can be very well developed in certain ways, but sexually we tend to be rather under developed, in part because the whole taboo of sexuality has kept a Greek darkness over something really rather simple. And so, the idea of allowing ourselves to know how afraid we are in relationship, and this kind of early, more splitting stages. And I do think that relationship with the mother, the feminist psychoanalytical thinking, is really very important for us to get our hands around, to understand why we want to plunder the Other, especially the feminine Other. Mother and mother earth. If we can begin to allow ourselves to know these truths -- at the same time, holding that we also have power because we're creative beings. We're not that lacking. If we can hold and pair these two bits of information at the same time, I think we can get somewhere. But it is difficult work.

Serge: So what comes up, what I'm hearing from both of you, is a sense of the centrality of power, of figuring out how we deal with power. So we're talking more about power than about sexuality. Is that right? Am I hearing you correctly?

Bill: In a general way, I would say that at the early action-logics, power and love and inquiry are viewed as virtually hostile to one another. Power is one thing. It's ugly and mean. And love is soft and gentle and love is blind and not inquiring. If I have enough power, I don't need to inquire. I can just make it come true. Whereas in the later action-logics I'm increasingly constructing, the three -- power, love and a inquiry -- are mutually necessary. Because to in fact be powerful in the world, I have to be receiving a lot of feedback about how the other person, the other people in the group are responding to actions that I take -- in order to make my own actions more timely. I have to get beyond thinking that there's a particular way of acting right or wrong. In the later stages, at the Redefining stage, the mutual form of power is visioning power.

In other words, can we talk and negotiate and develop a vision of the relationship we want together, rather than each of us assuming differently that when we say we love each other, we know what the other means and what we ourselves mean. That there's a way we can get together. Hilary talks about self-expression, but this would be, you know, mutual self expression. And then one of the big problems in life is yes, we have great intentions and visions, but we contradict them through our actions from time to time. So, we need to make an agreement with one another to give one another feedback about when our actions are incongruent with what we've agreed to as our vision. So there's a kind of, what the Marxist called it praxis, how do we

align our theory and our practice, what kind of conversation helps to do that. There's a great kind of power in that conversation that helped me become, have greater integrity between my intent and my outcome. So yeah, there are different kinds of power and those different kind of power create more mutuality. And in general sex is better when it's mutual, even if we agree together to have a little sado-masochism, just to get things spiced up a little, if we agree to it together, that's entirely different from if it is unilaterally enacted.

Hilary: Yeah. You know, sexuality and, and conversation, they're marvelous examples of this place where I'm sharing power, inviting of the other to be powerful with me, et cetera. These are places where literally things start to become sexy. They start to become erotic. So there is a polarity here, right? If we're only talking cognitively about power, it can sound like, oh, such boring people. But in fact this is in service to this beautiful body that does, that does want to light up with others. You know, there's this complex dance between between us, and I think some of women's delight and fear is one to have more partners to literally dance with or to converse with, right? Because the erotic expresses itself in different ways. It can be a beautiful meal. It can be a tango. It can be love making, it expresses itself in different ways.

And women have this great longing in us because I think we're very well socialized for partnership and sharing and having fun and talking about relationship. You know, everybody's already great at that. And so many women are still hungry for male partners to meet us at the same time. I think that the question for me and other women is what is a healthy masculine erotic system? What does that really even look like? So I wonder if Freud today would be asking, you know, 'Was will der Mann?', because toxic masculinity has expressed itself as this kind of dominance. And honestly, I think the payoff here is really great sex. What has passed for good sex is just appalling. And I say to younger women in particular, don't do that. It's horrible. You don't meet, it can be so much better, but you have to cultivate a kind of a kind of erotic inquiry together, which requires a willingness to go into issues of power and inquiry. And that's why I feel like, oh my God, we're never going to get there. In this time of Tinder and all of that, by staying alive longer,

Serge: I'm hearing it as what could be a conclusion to our discussion that sense that the way out is . I'm not just in a way to say that there's a balance between the three, between Eros, power, and inquiry. But what, Hilary, you were alluding to is actually that there is a playfulness and a dance of the spirit of Eros actually works beautifully with dancing, with power and playing with it.

Hilary: Yeah. Maybe that's the life force itself. It's important for me to say that so much of this work in personal terms and in life is life wanting us to live. That's what our whole DNA is about. So yeah, join, join the dance. We have the picture of a tango dancers on the cover. You know, we're playing with the dance.

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