

The Way of Flesh
Paul Levinson

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I walked up to the podium and blinked in the bright lights. The audience in front of me seemed as far away as the larger audience on the thousand inhabited worlds in our net.

I cleared my throat and began.

One of the central mysteries that yet eludes our understanding is the sudden dissipation of seemingly robust civilizations. On too many planets we find what looks like a thriving culture—with spires as high and as intricate as those of our own worlds—abandoned with barely a trace of the intelligent life that built them. It's almost as if everyone went home for lunch and never returned.

Our usual assumption in such cases is disease or some other physical culprit—a dramatic change in climate, for instance, that might have rendered agriculture and aquaculture unproductive.

But recent evidence uncovered by my colleagues and me on a distant planet have suggested another cause.

This was a planet which had achieved some global cooperation after centuries of bitter warfare. Its scientists were on the way to comprehending and manipulating reality on a subatomic level. Rearrangement of DNA in natural living patterns was just beginning to be used to literally improve the quality of organic life. Artificial intelligence had yet to be implemented, but visionaries were well aware of its benefits. Most sadly of all, this species had made the first groping efforts to propel itself beyond the confines of its planet.

What went wrong?

Serious diseases were not the cause. This planet had more than its fair share of them, but its species also had resilient immune systems, which were able sooner or later to come up with effective antibody responses. And these of course were helped by the diligent work of their scientists.

Nor were shifting climate conditions the cause. Many people in this civilization were concerned about climate shifts due to technological effects, but these proved far milder than feared.

What we did discover was something more insidious—a quite deadly social attitude.

It first appeared, as best we could tell, some time near the end of what the civilization reckoned to be its second millennium. Almost imperceptibly at first, but with astonishing pervasiveness, members of the species in the most advanced precincts of the civilization were made to feel uncomfortable about relating to members of the complementary sex in the workplace, in schools, everywhere.

Legal embodiments of these attitudes soon followed. On the eve of the second millennium, flirting was declared in many municipalities to be a misdemeanor on a par with littering.

Then smiling in public was declared an obscene gesture—a statute that was taken up in the next national election, and endorsed in laws governing Federal interstate commerce.

In a particularly telling series of court cases, the words 'I love you' were held to be vulgar and obscene—first when uttered to another member of the species in public without that member's express written prior permission, soon after when uttered any time to anyone other than one's own family.

Then things got even worse.

Children were particularly susceptible to such public pressures, and they inevitably brought these attitudes

home. Soon they felt uncomfortable expressing love—by either hugs or words—to their parents. And their parents—unable to cope with the cold chickens they had brought home to roost—responded with hurt and anger.

Children reared in such drab, loveless environments were, not surprisingly, unable to form loving relationships and families of their own when they came of sexual age. This in itself might not have been fatal to the species—reproduction, after all, can easily take place without love and family—but the poisoning of all flirting, even via glances of the eyes, took the edge off sexuality in all its forms, the unsanctioned as well as the dwindling sanctioned.

Reproduction rates plunged catastrophically—giving new meaning to what some members of the species had called the 'population bomb.' Children themselves, the obvious evidence of despised sexual activity, became an embarrassment, a segment of the species to be hidden from view, when they existed at all. Only offspring emerging from various means of artificial insemination were considered acceptable. But the means of producing even these were already in decay.

For the workplace had become a dungeon of boredom. Without the bright sinews of repartee between the sexes—devoid after a while of even the rich internal fantasy fanned by the occasional flirtation or hope of one—work became unbearable. Absenteeism skyrocketed—even among the very scholars and public critics who might have yet observed and stopped this deadening phenomenon.

But it was too late. With the air let out of its balloon, with birthrates far below the minimum level needed for species continuance, this once vibrant world shriveled to the deserted buildings and videotapes we found on our arrival—old videotapes from a happier time, locked in vaults that for years had been the only place where a smile or a loving gesture could be seen. The species had simply given up.

I ended my paper and soaked in the mixture of applause and awe that came from the audience.

I opened the floor to questions.

The spotlight shone on someone three rows back. I couldn't help noticing her soft purple burnish and lake-like eyes as she smiled at me. "Could you give us more details, please? Dates and places?" she asked.

I smiled back, and called up some data on the big screen. Oh sudden impulse, I also sent her a one-liner in sublingual private text mode. *How about a bite to eat after this?*

She busied herself looking at my data. A cool customer, this one. But I thought I noticed a small upturn at the corners of her smile.

Love to, she answered via private text.

A thrill hummed through every panel of my circuitry. One of the best things about my job was the high profile and entree it gave me to female models of like construction and mind.

Doing science is very different from doing the arts. Science is difficult. You need mathematics and statistics, which is dull like learning a language. The difference is that with a human language each word you learn you can use. In science you can work away for months and nothing happens. The arts intrinsically appeal to the human soul but a lot of science doesn't, and a lot of science is incredibly boring to do.

Biography

Paul Levinson is Editor of the Journal of Social and Evolutionary Systems. He has spoken on NPR, CSPAN, the BBC, CBC, and more than 50 radio and television shows. He is President and founder of Connected Education -- offering courses on the Internet since 1985 -- and is Visiting Professor at Fordham University. He is also President of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America.