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BOOK REVIEWS

Love Sense: The Revolutionary New Science of Romantic Relationships, by Sue Johnson. Little, Brown and Company, New York, 2013, 340 pages.

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I hadn't been a fan of EFT—Emotional Freedom Technique—but fortunately while we were browsing a bookstore at a professional conference, a respected colleague caught me off guard with a strong recommendation for Sue Johnson's first book, *Hold Me Tight*. I skimmed the table of contents, saw that it had a chapter on sex, and bought it. I started reading it on the train home from the conference and was intrigued by what it offered. One thing led to another and I soon found myself reading Sue Johnson's latest book, *Love Sense*.

Hold Me Tight is organized around seven conversations that she recommends couples have in order to enhance their relationships. It can be used as a self-help manual by almost any couple. *Love Sense*, on the other hand, is addressed more to professionals who want to understand the theory and research behind EFT. It emphasizes the scientific basis for the techniques being offered, presenting both the author's own research as well as that of others in the field.

Based on this research, the destructive repetitive patterns of interaction we see in the couples in our offices—and in our own intimate relationships—are boiled down to three basic “Demon Dialogues.” Each is based on needs and fears having to do with attachment, and is perpetuated by keeping these needs and fears outside of conscious awareness. The cure is found in making these increasingly conscious, becoming aware of places of particular vulnerability in ourselves and our partners, giving and receiving forgiveness for the pain already inflicted, and pursuing a deeper level of intimacy. This deeper intimacy involves extraordinary vulnerability as each person discovers and reveals the depth of neediness and fear that surrounds the attempt to form a secure attachment with another adult. Areas in which each person is particularly reactive as a result of emotional injuries (“raw spots”), and patterns or situations in which the couple as a unit tends to spin out of control, must be addressed and brought under control in the process of this deepening of intimacy. Once these are consciously addressed and brought under control, then sex, touch, and ongoing intimate dialogue about fear, longing, and vulnerability can be used to sustain and further deepen intimacy.

The most pivotal concept in EFT, at least for me, is its approach to attachment. Rather than viewing the attainment of a secure attachment as something that can only happen in childhood, Johnson holds that it is never too late. She says that, in fact, it is really the main point of any deep relationship, and of marriage in particular, to seize the opportunity to do so and to thereby enhance one's overall level of physical, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing.

Reading this book has impacted how I work with couples, and how I relate to my wife, in ways that I would never have imagined. However, I still have some

quibbles with what Johnson has to say, or perhaps what she does not say.

First, the importance of the relationship between therapist and client is not clearly acknowledged. This omission invites skeptics to view EFT as a manualized technique rather than a profoundly powerful conceptual framework for all relationships, including the therapist/client relationship. It is possible that Johnson herself does not realize the impact of her own way of interacting with clients.¹ However, the way she seems warm and real, even as an author, leads me to imagine that her clients feel something beyond the theoretical framework and exercises offered by EFT. In the book, she refers to her own struggles with intimacy in a way that makes it easy to believe she is genuinely practicing what she preaches, and also to feel close to her.

In *Hold Me Tight*, Johnson describes her childhood experiences growing up in the family business. Maybe the kind of interpersonal warmth and acceptance that is so important in the psychotherapy relationship is just so second nature to her that she takes it as a given. See what you think:

I grew up in a small, less than affluent British town after World War II, where the sense that we all needed to pull together to survive was tangible. Everyone came to the pub—the clergyman, the commodore, the paper seller, the judge, the doctor, the clerk, the housewife, and the whore. Elderly villagers would spend all evening in one corner playing cards and discussing politics. Tramps who wandered from town to town would be given shelter, a beer, and a huge plate of my mother's bacon and eggs before they wandered on. Soldiers who broke down, overwhelmed with the memories of war, were taken into a back room, held, and comforted. Mourners were given a hug, a whiskey, and maybe a cheery out-of-tune song on the piano, courtesy of my grandmother. Of course, there was also fighting and dissension, prejudice and cruelty. But in the end, there was a sense that we all stood together. We knew that we needed each other. And most of the time, there were at least one or two of us who could manage to be compassionate.

For psychotherapists, at least those of us of the relational persuasion, attachment issues are part-and-parcel of what we address every day in our work. The concepts and insights offered in *Love Sense* apply to our client relationships in a manner that does not seem fully appreciated by the author. This possibility does not reduce my appreciation for what she has offered in this book, and in fact increases my curiosity and self-observation as I work with my clients.

There are enormous implications of this book for at least three areas: (a) spirituality, (b) society, and (c) group therapy. The second of these, society, is covered in a most compelling manner in the final chapter. Johnson waxes almost evangelical as she describes the social ills resulting from the lack of intimate connections and a variety of ways that these might be addressed. But, the implications for spirituality and for group therapy seem to be almost ignored: my second quibble with the book.

Johnson does not devote much of the book to spirituality, so it's hard to know where she stands. Interestingly, however, she concludes the book with four lines

1. At one point in *Love Sense*, she notes that her students often express difficulty understanding how to be as empathic as she is. She seems to dismiss the idea that she may be unique in this regard and reminds them to pay attention to non-verbal cues about emotional states.

from an old Christian hymn that she says cause her to weep each time she hears them. However, she seems to imply that it is the metaphorical application of these words to human-to-human relationships that moves her, rather than the human-to-Divine relationship that the words actually describe. Although there are brief references to a variety of spiritual traditions, including shamanism, nothing is said about the potential significance of the cultivation of deep and intimate relationships between humans and other species, or between humans and God.

Nor is there mention of group therapy in the book. I tell my clients when they enter a group that it is going to provide them an opportunity to have deeply meaningful and intimate relationships with the other members of the group, with the expectation that the capacity for such relationships will generalize to others outside the group. Sometimes group members describe the way their experience in group raises the bar for outside relationships. They say they are no longer willing to settle for relatively superficial relationships, whether they are long-standing connections or new ones.

My final quibble has to do with references. Although each chapter has an abundance of references at the end, they are not cited directly in the text. Much of what she reports is interesting enough—sometimes unbelievable enough—to cause me to want to see where she got her information. Rummaging through the references at the end of the chapter can be frustrating.

One of the fascinating reports in *Love Sense* had to do with the way the use of Botox influences empathy. I was not surprised to learn that the stiffening of facial muscles in a person treated with Botox would make it harder for someone else to read that person's emotional state. I was surprised to learn that Botox also inhibits the recipient's ability to read another's emotions. Apparently the stiffening to the facial muscles makes it harder for the mirror neurons to do their work.

The combination of the author's evangelical fervor and the presentation of scientific research findings is powerful. Unlike the Dalai Lama, who is reported to have said that he would put his faith in science if it ever diverged from Buddhist principles, I am not so sure what I would do if I had to make a choice between belief and science. If new research were to emerge indicating that deep and trustworthy emotional connections are not really so good for us, I would probably fall back on my own experience of the value of such connections and reject the science. I hope I never have to choose. When I said at the beginning of this review that I had not been a fan of EFT it was a bit of an understatement. It is now a bit startling to realize that I have become a convert, thanks to Sue Johnson's combination of evangelism and science.