

# The Golden Fleece Award: Love's Labours Almost Lost

June 01, 2006

In 1975, I and two of my colleagues at the University of Wisconsin, Mary Utne O'Brien and Jane Traupmann Pillemer, were collaborating on a major research program. We were attempting to determine the extent to which the major cognitive and emotional theories could tell us something about the nature of passionate love and sexual desire. We had a bit of money to work with since the National Science Foundation had awarded us a tiny grant designed to allow us to investigate the importance of social justice and equity in romantic exchanges. Then along came Wisconsin's US Senator William Proxmire, who awarded me what came to be a vastly publicized "Golden Fleece Award," claiming I was "fleecing" taxpayers with my "unnecessary" scientific research.

Barry Goldwater and three University of Chicago Nobel Prize Winners came to my defense in *The New York Times* and *Capital Times*. So did columnist James Reston. In his column in *The New York Times*, Reston wryly agreed that love will always be a mystery. "But if the sociologists and psychologists can get even a suggestion of the answer to our pattern of romantic love, marriage, disillusion, divorce—and the children left behind—it would be the best investment of federal money since Jefferson made the Louisiana purchase," he wrote.

The University of Wisconsin Madison Faculty Senate also met, considered the Senator's charges, and voted to condemn him by a vote of 84 to 1.

Alas, our social science research didn't garner unwavering popular support.

A friend, Roland W. Radloff (at that time program director of NSF's social psychology program) suggested I refrain from submitting any grants to NSF for a while. "Let it blow over," he advised. Research on this topic had become too hot to handle. I agreed. And indeed, since then all my research has been privately funded.

My mother's Roman Catholic Bishop got into the act. Right Reverend Richard S. Emrich issued a message to the Detroit parishes denouncing NSF for supporting scientists' attempts to unravel the "most sacred mysteries of love and life." "Who granted these 'scientists' the ability to see into men's minds and hearts?" he asked. Were our findings going to eliminate pride, selfishness, jealousy, suffering, and war?

"Jesus Christ has taught us all that we need to know about love and life. . . It is His commands we must follow, not the childish 'advice' of some arrogant, secular scientist, who presumes to know more than Our Lord," said the Bishop.

A Chicago tabloid—*The Chicago Tribune*—ran a contest. Readers could call in and vote: "Who is right—Proxmire or Hatfield?" A massive number of readers (and even a few friends) wrote in to say I was "naive" to think love and sex could be studied scientifically. I lost the contest: Proxmire 87.5

percent, me 12.5 percent.

This silliness went on for many years. The news stories began to swirl around like some kind of toxic cosmic dust. Senator Proxmire would return to Madison on a Sunday (to attend a Badgers' football game); he'd take that opportunity to appear on a local TV show denouncing (sigh!) love research. I would be asked to reply. On Monday, one of Senator Proxmire's comic writers would issue a devastatingly funny press release (inaccurate but beguiling) about the inanities of our love and sex research. By Tuesday morning, I'd be reeling from its aftershock. On Wednesday, the fallout would be settling in near Tokyo. Stories would appear in the *Asahi Shimbun*, *Mainichi Shimbun*, and *Yomiuri Shimbun*. A few weeks later, *The Bangladeshi Standard's* Geiger counters would be clicking out the news. Each time an editor in Japan, Bangladesh, or Mozambique translated the story, a name would get misspelled here, a word altered there, and the next thing you know, the *Wisconsin State Journal* would have picked up the challenge or comic riff yet again. The news story would be so altered and so sensationalized—by now, Dr. Hatfield, the mad doctor of love, would be caught slipping women dime bags of marijuana, asking students to confess their darkest secrets while both were doing God-knows-what in their bedrooms—that the *Journal* would assume that somehow they'd missed a heck of a story. Then once more the dust would start swirling around the earth, entering newer and higher orbits with each new news cycle.

I got to know the postman very well indeed as he dragged in mail by the bagful. I saved the best of those letters, and recently, when I decided to write a comic novel about *Rosie*, a young sexuality researcher who gets in trouble for *her* research, I had those Proxmire newscasts, comic attacks, and letters to draw on. Rosie's adventures are pure fantasy—except for the amazing letters I received. I could not construct missives more stunning. Crazy persons' letters, with blood curdling threats. Spiky letters, painstakingly, tremblingly constructed. Letters written in Day-Glo colors. Words marching in an orderly way across the top of the page, down the sides, and along the bottom, but then they began to sprawl in upon themselves, growing smaller and smaller as they whirled around the page. At the vortex, the microscopic calligraphy ended in a sinister inkblot. Letters filled with pain and suffering. Most people, of course, wanted to know how they could scam some of the US government's "loot" for themselves. When they discovered they would have to dash off a grant—and actually get that grant reviewed—they were irate.

How did I cope? Not very well, I'm afraid. I am a shy person, not on the lookout for conflict; I just like to pursue my intellectual interests. So l'affaire Proxmire was actually painful to me. When I remember those days, I do so mostly with embarrassment, despite the eventual positive and rewarding outcome.

Thank God for longevity! I have hung around long enough to see things change for the better. When Ellen Berscheid and I wrote *Interpersonal Attraction* (in 1969), we were able to ferret out precious little research on passionate love and sexual desire. It was pathetic. We had to speculate about the nature of love with little or no data (and shockingly little experience of our own) to guide us.

What a change has occurred in 30+ years! There are historical periods when scientific and technological advances allow scientists to take giant strides forward. This is certainly one of those times. In spite of some of the current troubles in American science policy, we still live in a time of amazing scientific ferment. Today, scholars from a variety of theoretical disciplines—social psychologists, anthropologists, evolutionary psychologists, microbiologists, neuroendocrinologists, and more—are addressing the same issues with which we struggled. They are employing an impressive array of new techniques as well: they

are studying primates in the wild and in captivity and pouring over fMRIs. Historians are now studying history from the “bottom up” rather than the “top down.” They are examining less the lives of kings and queens and more those of the majority of our deceased sisters and brothers, utilizing demographic data (marriage, birth, death, and divorce records) architectural and archaeological remains, medical manuals, church edicts, law cases, song lyrics, and whatever diaries and letters they can find.

Recently, my husband, Richard L. Rapson, and I summarized this impressive research in: *Love, Sex, and Intimacy: Their Psychology, Biology, and History*, and also in *Love and Sex: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*. (The first book details everything scientists and scholars know about passionate love and intimacy in the West, including the formation, maintenance, and ending of relationships. The second text considers passionate love worldwide.)

In the very near future, I suspect that social psychologists will be well on the way to answering some of the questions that have plagued researchers for centuries. These inquiries will undoubtedly raise hackles in some quarters of society, but the quest for knowledge and understanding cannot be stilled for very long.

Senator Proxmire may not have intended it, but in Greek mythology the search for the Golden Fleece was considered a noble and heroic undertaking—as indeed it has proven itself to be.