

San Francisco Chronicle

2/10/2008

I'm 10 minutes early, and **John Gray**, who's been "doing press" all day, hasn't yet had lunch, which is lucky for me. I follow him into the kitchen of his Mill Valley house, where he heads to the counter to make a sandwich and I head to the refrigerator door. For a non-spiritually minded investigator, reading what a person posts there is like reading his aura.

Research results: **Gray** and his wife, Bonnie, believe in the Pachamama Alliance, which promotes connections with the people of the rain forest and seeks to create "an environmentally sustainable, spiritually fulfilling and socially just human presence on this planet as the guiding principle" of existence. I am about to ask **Gray**, author of 15 books about relationships that have sold 30 million copies, and now a 16th, "Why Mars & Venus Collide, Improving Relationships by Understanding How Men and Women Cope Differently With Stress," what literature he studies to improve his own life, but next to the Pachamama statements was a saved prophecy from a fortune cookie that makes arduous self-help efforts unnecessary: "You will be successful in whatever you do."

The Grays live in a sprawling modern home atop a hillside, separated from the rest of the world by a stone-pillared electronic gate. In the kitchen, which opens onto a family room, they offer me a glass of water and assure me that it is twice purified, and then, at Bonnie's urging, we move to the sunny living room, a large and comfortable place with a huge fireplace, a picture of an adored granddaughter on the piano and shelves filled with reading and reference material, including a World Book encyclopedia set. There are many paintings and much statuary, most of it bronze, figurative, romantic and relevant to the Grays' work about sustained love.

John is brown-haired, smooth-faced, casual in jeans and untucked shirt; Bonnie, a little more formal, has curly gray hair, deep blue eyes and is wearing a deep-necked sweater that reveals womanly cleavage. The couple have been married for 22 years, they say, as Bonnie perches on the arm of the sofa on which her husband settles. They moved here from Los Angeles; Bonnie grew up in Southern California, **John** in Houston, where his dad was an oil man, he says. Each has been married once before.

John's "Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus" was the best-selling book of the '90s, according to USA Today. If he is the sun at the center of the Mars/Venus universe, Bonnie is its office manager, not an insignificant job. There are offices here and in Los Angeles, Maryland and Arizona; the Grays preside over counseling centers in France, there's a Mars/Venus theatrical production showing at an 800-seat theater in Paris, and John's work was the subject of a musical that used to play at the Flamingo in Las Vegas. "John's an international person," Bonnie says.

Gray presides over monthly seminars in Mill Valley, not only informative, he says, but also "funny and humorous." According to Bonnie, who moves closer to her husband as the conversation turns to the success of the programs, "people really relate to this material. We want to do something wherever we are."

"Men like funny," **Gray** says. "Often women are our major buyers, so we want to make a message for men, too." Later, he adjusts this, saying that women were major buyers when the first Mars/Venus book came out, in 1992. Now, 16 years and 13 books later (there were two before Mars/Venus), it's 50/50.

The central concept behind all this is that in order for men and women to understand each other, they must first understand that they have different operating systems, "innate biochemical differences." The first three chapters of the new book make the case that men under stress are ruled by testosterone, which makes them respond to stress with an aggressive compulsion to problem-solve, while women are ruled by oxytocin, which makes them seek comfort and solutions by seeking social contacts.

"By the end of the day, a man's body stops making testosterone unless he rests. ... When it is depleted, he is depressed." He comes home from the office, and needs to be alone, to "return to his cave" to bring up his testosterone level and to make him feel good. "Female depression, on the other hand, is caused by being overwhelmed, having the feeling of too much to do. Giving, giving, giving is the Venusian mode. ... What I wrote is particularly directed to talk about differences."

Among the things **Gray** says stimulate testosterone, a man's feel-good hormone: goal-setting, competition, risk, danger, dominance. Among the things he says stimulate oxytocin, the woman's feel-good hormone: sharing, communication, safety, cleanliness, virtue. If these lists seem fairly close to snails and puppy dog tails versus sugar and spice, that's how the concepts of Mars and Venus were perceived when they were introduced. Eighteen years ago, says **Gray**, when he began writing, it was unfashionable to talk about differences between men and women. Now, although we know that men and women "can do the same job ... gender studies have gradually become a part of every university. It all backs up my work."

Gray, who began studying yoga at 4 and jokes that at 21 he made "the first video on the planet," about yoga, studied with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in India when he was in his 20s and was a Hindu monk for nine years. He was living as a monk in Switzerland when his bipolar brother committed suicide, which led to Gray's returning to the United States to earn a doctorate in psychology. His theories are based on his work as a certified family counselor.

"People don't spend all day long helping people improve their relationships" without learning, he says. "I observe people. I'm really good at truly observing people, the way they act," and then "helping them feel good about themselves and helping to motivate them. ..."

"I can give a one-hour talk to 5,000 people and after it, people come up and say, 'You described me to a T.'" When he signs books, Bonnie said, "You should see the audience responding."

He describes his life as "completely consistent with everything in that book." The couple has Venusian chats, in which **John** forces himself to listen while Bonnie describes a problem or her day. They take time-outs when discussions threaten to become arguments. Have they become better at their own marriage?

"A resounding yes," Bonnie says. **John** recounts a story from the book about their making love one day, after they had been lovers for six years, and reflecting afterward on why it was even better than when they'd first met. It was Bonnie who realized that in the early days, they'd known everything good about each other; after time together, the thrilling thing was realizing they loved each other while knowing everything bad about each other, too.

Their own relationship provides major theoretical fodder. "He's a researcher," Bonnie says. "This is all grist for the mill. ... In the beginning, I was kind of shocked about how open **John** is about the relationship. I tend not to be that way. When we're in the middle of something, I think, 'Please don't share until we resolve this.'"

I ask for an example of what she calls "John's willingness to open up."
"He marched you right into the kitchen," she says, "and I thought, 'Whoa.' For me that was not as comfortable. All in all, I have to trust that his openness takes into consideration my level of safety and security."

I ask about their last tiff. "You just saw it," he says. "And she wonderfully forgave me. I know that she's so innocent about it. It's a wonderful part of who she is." By this time, they're sitting quite close. A light kiss is exchanged.

I ask about bigger fights. **John** was taking a trip and Bonnie wanted him to carry a pager. He resisted. They applied John's concepts, not trying to fix it right away. She talked about the reasons she was nervous about not being able to be in touch. "I listened," he says. "I practiced my gazing technique. I looked her in the face." He didn't interrupt. "She felt heard. She needs to feel heard first."

They decided that he would call home every day at the same time. "In a lot of women's lives, there's so much chaos they don't know that the problem will be solved," Bonnie says. But once she felt heard, she was sure the problem would be solved. "He really got the scope of it," says she. "She's a smart lady," says he.

"People are always asking me, 'How did you get so successful?'" **Gray** says. "You make a woman happy. And when she's happy she gives her support, and you can then live a successful life. If a man makes a woman happy, then he's happy. When a woman feels someone cares about her, that makes her happy. ... When I take her out to dinner, she says, 'Thanks for dinner.'"

Bonnie: "I know that makes a difference to him. A woman learns how to give that nutrition to a man."

"My lovely wife always lets me know when I do something good," says **John**. "Like 'What you said in the office that day was so special, I'm still riding on that wave of love.'"

Lay surfers hoping to ride that particular wave have supported a host of **Gray** enterprises, including counselors and coaches for face-to-face or telephone sessions on Mars/Venus techniques, workshops at a property in Mendocino as well as Mill Valley, two Internet TV shows (one on relationships and one on health), and a line of nutrition supplements for mental and physical health. **John**, a believer in cleansing fasts, says, "I know health secrets they don't teach you in medical school. They don't teach about health; they teach about disease."

He tries every product while he is formulating it. "I can feel the effects of anything that goes in my body," he says.

"He has a very sensitive body," Bonnie confirms.

His interest in health is natural, he says, because his dad sold nutritional products and his mother ran a spiritual bookstore. He often appears at anti-aging conferences.

Perhaps the new book's most surprising advice is for women to talk over problems with female friends before bringing it to their men. Bonnie, member of a women's group for 20 years, attests that talking over an issue helps her define it. "When I get clear on it, I can present it to **John**."

Does Bonnie complain about **John** to her friends? "I don't talk to anyone about my family unless I know they absolutely adore my family," Bonnie says.

"It's a problem when women form groups and nobody knows the husband or their family or how wonderful their family are," **John** says. "They can get trapped in the negative. If they know what a wonderful family it is, it's 'I'm going through a rough patch, but it's quite a nice road.'"

Finally, we get to the Big Bopper of bonding experiences.

"I know so much of our harmony is about our sex life," **John** says. "Making love with Bonnie I feel like I'm 18 years old." The couple, the parents of three grown children, cuddle even closer on the couch. "Our daughter says, 'Don't do it in front of me,'" Bonnie giggles. "But we're just kissing."

Their relationship deepens every time he listens to Bonnie while using his gazing technique, **John** says. I ask Bonnie whether knowing he's using his gazing technique is the same as just perceiving that he's gazing at her. She says she is thrilled to know that he is trying to please and satisfy her.

Years ago, she let him know that she wanted him to bring her flowers by leaving empty vases near the door that he would see when he was leaving. Nowadays, he always brings

home the flowers that are onstage during speaking engagements. Bonnie realizes, **John** says, that "he's doing this because he loves me and he wants to support me."

He learned his hug technique - finding her every morning, first thing after arising, and giving her a hug - from her. He really enjoys that. And she really enjoys that.

"Gradually," he says, "it's become more natural."

Author appearances

John Gray will talk about his book at 7 p.m. Monday at Book Passage in Corte Madera; 7 p.m. Tuesday at Copperfield's Books in Santa Rosa; 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at Capitola Book Cafe in Capitola; and 7 p.m. Friday at East West Books in Mountain View. For more information, go to www.marsvenus.com.

Comment E-mail Leah **Garchik** at lgarchik@sfcchronicle.com. **Pull Quote** "John's "Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus" was the best-selling book of the '90s, according to USA Today."

""In the beginning, I was kind of shocked about how open **John** is about the relationship. I tend not to be that way. When we're in the middle of something, I think, 'Please don't share until we resolve this.' "" (Bonnie **Gray**) **Column Series Section LV Caption [1]** Best-selling author **John Gray** demonstrates his "gazing" technique on his wife, Bonnie, in their Mill Valley home. They've been married 22 years. (Deanne Fitzmaurice / The Chronicle) **Publication** THE SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE **Edition** FINAL **PageNumber** F1 **Category** **Sup Category** **Subject** STYLE; BIOGRAPHY; BOOKS; GENDER **Keywords** **Name** **John Gray**; Why Mars & Venus Collide, Improving Relationships by Understanding How Men and Women Cope Differently With Stress; Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus; Bonnie **Gray** **Location** **GeoFeature** **Word Count** 2136

Leah Garchik

San Francisco Chronicle