

## **The Cosmic Chain of Intimacy**

by **Kim A. Dawson**

**W**ho am I? Where did I come from? What is the purpose of life? These are questions most people relegate to philosophers, scientists, and religious conversations. If they manage to creep into mealtime parlance, they may be considered “too heavy” and people not given to such “deep” considerations may withdraw or crack a joke in an effort to change the subject. As certain fodder for argument and as issues too personal for public discussion, these topics tend to be avoided. A quip to “lighten up” can be expected.

The most meaningful and courageous of such weighty topics might touch on global politics and the nature of god. But when it boils down to it, these matters are treated as a matter of opinion, of subjective experience. This vulnerability to subjectivity is often used, unfortunately, as a basis to avoid or change the subject. Clearly, there is really no “correct” or “right” answer, although people often treat their opinions as if they reflect the “truth”. As we will see, there is no absolute truth.

Consider the following scenario. Imagine two people waiting at a traffic light. Clearly, they would have no trouble agreeing that the “truth” is that they are, indeed, waiting for the light to change. But as it turns out, their cars are quite deliberately facing opposite directions, so they cannot agree on “the truth” about which direction is the one that should be traveled at that particular moment. Nor do they even try. Likewise, a man driving one of these cars might not have any children yet, but wants a girl. The woman driving the other car doesn't have any children yet, but wants a boy. It so happens that as they pass each other by, they make eye contact, feel attracted to each other, and end up meeting coincidentally at a house party held by a friend they unknowingly have in common that same evening.

Thus, when one digs even a little bit into everyday situations, there is such a variety of opinions that there is little place to hang a hat. This couple could have been “fated” or they might have had a “chance encounter”. But exploring these questions openly and honestly can lead to intimacy or emotional connection and when this connection doesn't occur, the experience can be utterly unsatisfying; or even as a tragic loss, depending on how attractive we found the potential partner.

It seems to me that there must be answers to the perennial questions of the identity, source, and purpose of life. Even if we humans are the ones who construct them, we must admit we are subjective and therefore biased in their invention. But this doesn't mean we can't accept responsibility for celebrating them with grace, humour, and humility. Moreover, there must be reasonable, useful, and even helpful ways to phrase them that most people would accept as unoffensive.

Now, despite that some people would view me as an “expert”, I won't presume that I have the absolute answer or the final say, not by any stretch of the imagination. But I would propose to contribute something new to an already existing dialog about these critical questions. Thus, as part of an ongoing series of articles about brain development, I will place the perennial questions (given above) in the context of a particular stage of human development: the formation of a sexually and emotionally intimate relationship. Commonly thought to be the domain of the young, upon reflection, many elders can vouch for the replay of this “intimacy cycle” at various points throughout their lives.

In this context, then, let's take, for example, the notion of having children. Let's also start by exploring how people might relate around this topic. Guess what the following questions have in common. “Are you single?” and “Do you want to have children?” These are critical questions when two reproductively healthy adults meet, are sexually attracted to each other, and begin courting or

mating rituals. Before these two meet, nobody can possibly know how likely it is that they will become intimate or generate a baby through their contact. Even after they meet, the potential may remain unknown, but it is certainly more noticeable when two people “hit it off”. Their pupils dilate, they make more eye contact, they talk easily together about some things and more nervously about others. Their body language changes. They spend more time physically close to each other. They may give more compliments or do favours for each other. Such an exchange might sound something like:

“I couldn't help but notice how beautiful you look...”

“Why thank you! I like the cologne you're wearing.”

“May I buy you a drink?”

“I really love this song. Perhaps after we dance.”

This stage of development reflects Erik Erikson's stage of conflict between intimacy versus isolation. Biologically speaking, the challenge here is to learn to get along with someone well enough to make expressing their sexuality a safe thing to do. This increases the chances of passing their genes (that is, their chemical make-up) into the next generation. Assuming that birth-control or the aggressive act of rape is *not* part of this situation, the emotional attraction can be communicated by “getting naked” and actually becoming part of another person by physically joining. Of course, all of this takes place before the *product* or *consequence* of the mating occurs. Here, we still abide in the phase of potential union, the potential birth of a relationship which is the next link in the chain reaction that leads to conception.

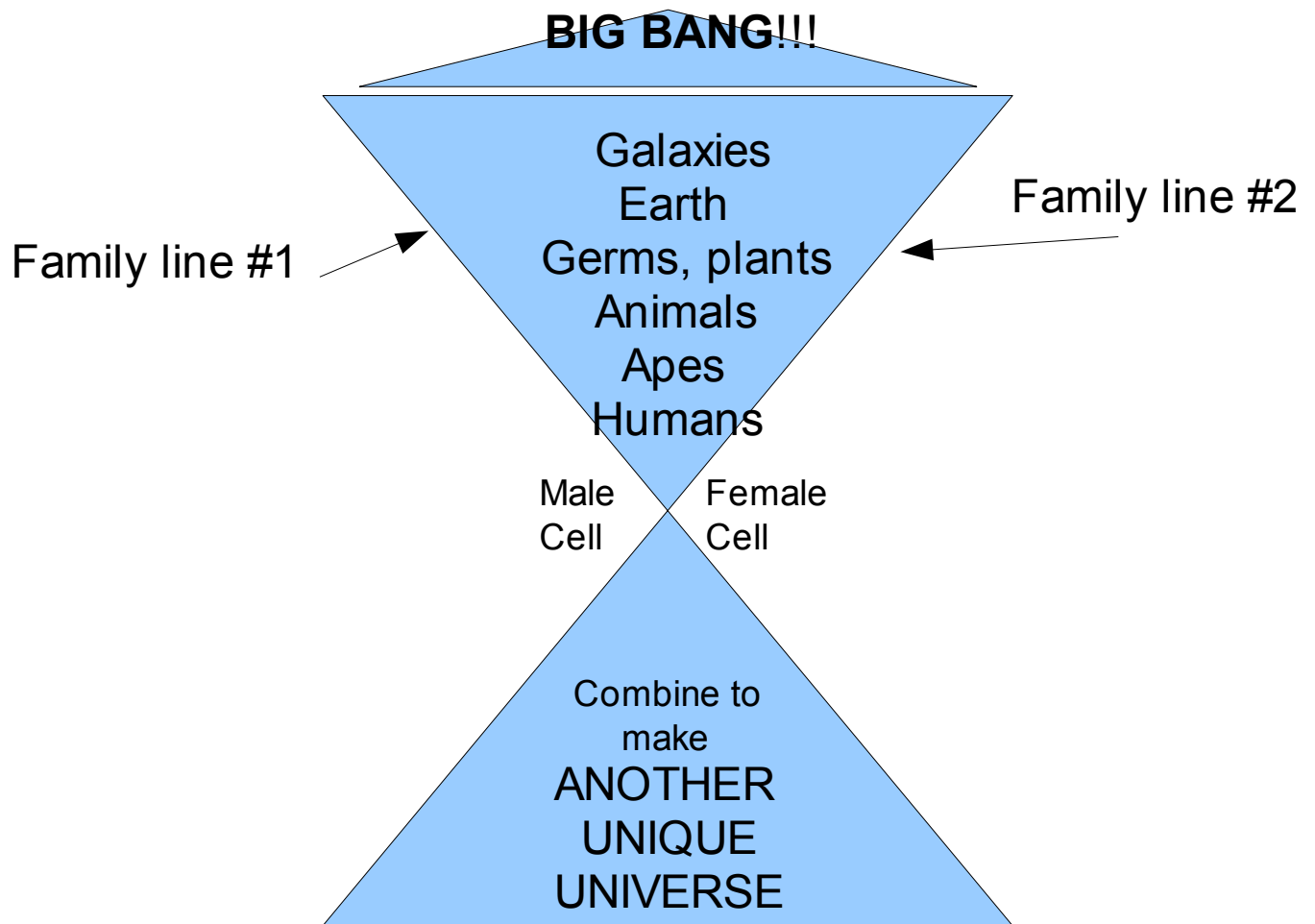
Shortly before conception, considerate and healthy love-makers commonly express the hope that “it was good for” their partner. This is the pleasure principle expressed as the golden rule in the most intimate and vulnerable way. Where conception is avoided or interrupted (by birth control, infertility, or by being caught in the act), an equally valid purpose of sexual intercourse is emotional pleasure. It should come as no surprise that there is research suggesting that satisfying sex pays off for couples by increasing their satisfaction with the relationship overall. This is not to say that satisfying relationships depend entirely on satisfying sex, but that physical affection is clearly an important component of a fully rewarding and intimate friendship. In the cases of birth control or infertility, the additional purpose of setting the stage for family planning may enter the picture.

Returning to the situation in which a conception is immediately viable, each person contributes a part of his or her body to the other. A single cell (a so-called “gamete”) is given to the other. In humans, the female gift to the male remains inside herself and is nurtured for the time being before being offered outwardly. Meanwhile, the male gift is taken from inside himself and expelled into her. These two cells are then joined in a warm, dark, moist medium which nurtures the union (a so-called “zygote”) as it divides and multiplies. Simultaneous division and multiplication, over and over, as the zygote grows into a recognizably living organism. About 40 weeks later, a buzzing ball of energy emerges as a unique entity representing the merging of two parents. Should it live long enough and cope with all the overwhelming problems it encounters before reaching reproductive maturity, it is full of potential to participate in the age-old mating ritual and so much more.

So, the early adult's answer to the teenage question “Who am I?” could be that “I am the role I play in the chain-reaction called life”. I am the thing that resulted from my parents having sexual intercourse (eeuuwww!) who resulted from their parents doing the same who resulted from my great grandparents, etc. etc. etc., on back to the beginning. Thus, I am (and we are each) the end of a family line that extends back to the beginning of life, and possibly, because that is where life sprang from, the beginning of the universe .

Biologically speaking, this is also an answer to the question “where do I come from?” From a

spiritual point of view, it may seem presumptuous to even attempt to answer this question, but there actually is a number of fairly clear directions we can pursue. First, there is general consensus among scientists that the creation of the universe occurred at the moment of the Big Bang, when a singularity exploded. The product of this explosion was the formation of nebulae and galaxies which have since been spreading out from that first singularity. Some time later, at least on Earth (actually a very insignificant planet revolving around a very common type of star), various things started to occur. Viruses, bacteria, insects, plants, and animals evolved. Next, the most important point in the scheme of evolution occurred. Humans evolved! Fourth, even more importantly, both you (yes, you!) and I evolved from the sexual activities of human beings who preceded us. (Fortunately or not, most of this activity has not been historically documented, but I would strongly recommend books by Carl Sagan for more information on this cosmic, but very practical subject). Finally, we have the opportunity to contribute our cells to the next step in the evolution of life on earth! This whole process can be pictured using the image of an hourglass as shown below.



## THE HOURGLASS MODEL OF COSMIC INTIMACY

In a biological sense, then, there are two fundamental variables collaborating in the formation of a human being. First, the physical intimacy of sexual contact is necessary for a new person to be generated – thus, the act of “procreation” (the act that is required to bring something new into being) can occur. Second, there is a chain reaction which was ultimately started by the Big Bang.<sup>1</sup> But, to state the obvious, there is more to having a baby than having sex, although neither the baby nor ourselves would exist without it! Whether physical intimacy between two people or a test-tube is responsible, sex is necessary to make a baby. But sex between parents is not nearly enough nor is it even necessary for the baby's survival, growth, and healthy brain development. This fact makes it possible and often desirable for members of the community to raise a child, rather than the birth parents themselves.

Perhaps this is so self-evident that it doesn't even need mentioning, but it places humanity and each of its members into a meaningful context. It means we are animals, very much like any other, with a drive to approach something resembling a pleasurable life and to avoid something we imagine could be a painful death. I wonder what it is that makes open discussion of these facts so distasteful and uncomfortable, though it might have something to do with the raw vulnerabilities and risks inherent in acts of intimacy, physical and emotional sharing, and the extreme sensitivity of both naked and new life to surrounding dangers. Such risks include the sensitivity of the developing brain to toxins (such as nicotine, alcohol, cocaine, and other drugs) as well as to stress experienced by the woman carrying the baby. I think that by avoiding the subject, we are trying to protect ourselves these against vulnerabilities. In so doing, we accomplish two things at once. Not only do we hold innocent life to be sacred, but we also risk committing acts that harm the baby's brain simply out of ignorance of well-known risks to brain development.

As you can see, there is a very large investment of energy around risks to the person, partner, and particularly to the offspring. It's no wonder that we get so emotional about this stuff! And when its emotionally aroused, the brain's language centres don't work so well, so it gets more difficult to talk to each other. This can lead to relationship difficulties including arguments about what the baby needs, what I need, and what I think you need as my partner.

To provide a glimpse into perennial themes that underlie questions of the identity, source, and purpose of life, we have focused on the issue of biological intimacy and the germination and vulnerability of a new human being. How couples manage the ongoing need for helping and supporting the next generation on its challenging journey through life will be the topic of the next article in the series, as will a more detailed consideration of those who are excluded from the biological chain of life as a result of infertility.

*Kim A. Dawson is a registered psychologist residing and practicing in Chilliwack, B.C., Canada. His website is [www.dawsonpsychologicalservices.com](http://www.dawsonpsychologicalservices.com) and he can be reached by email at [kadawson@dawsonpsychologicalservices.com](mailto:kadawson@dawsonpsychologicalservices.com).*

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<sup>1</sup> Thus far, I have avoided the issue of what actually initiated the Big Bang. I will leave this to academic and religious folk to discuss. I believe the resolution of that problem is irrelevant to the natural course of things. Another article on the importance of time may nevertheless propose such a resolution.