

# Chapter 7

## Utopian vision

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It is curious to observe that most science fiction novels are dystopic in nature. These stories may bias our imagination toward the more sinister side. However, in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's novel *Herland* (1915), an example of an ecological utopia is provided. The story is told from the perspective of three explorers who discover a country the size of the Netherlands that has been isolated for 2000 years from the rest of the world. In this country there are only women who, by some process, have learned to give birth without the involvement of men. The country has been cut off in the mountain due to an eruption of a volcano at the time of war when the men were warring outside the country. First, the remaining women considered suicide but decided to live their lives to the end. At some point, a woman conceived a child and 'the whole spirit of the country changed from mourning and mere courageous resignation to proud joy'. This became the foundation of a new race of women able to regenerate the species.

The story is about how a utopian society might develop when the culture is focused on 'mothering' with the continuous and conscious development of a country toward a better place for people to grow up in. The novel is from 1915 and is a comment in a sense from the suffragette movement. But, putting that aside for a moment, it describes what it would take to create a society of increasing beauty and happiness of and for its inhabitants.

A few quotes from the book give a sense of a completely different possible future:

*'Yet, they were not old women. Each was in the full bloom of rosy health, erect, serene, standing sure-footed and light as any pugilist.'*

*Never, anywhere before, had I seen women of precisely this quality. Fishwives and market women might show similar strength, but it was coarse and powerful. College professors, teachers, writers – many women showed similar intelligence but often wore a strained nervous look, while these were as calm as cows, for all their evident intellect.*

*... one of the things most impressive about them all was the absence of irritability.*

*All the scraps and leavings of their food, plant waste from lumber work or textile industry, all the solids combined – everything which came from the earth went back to it. The practical result was like that in any healthy forest; an increasingly valuable soil was being built, instead of the progressive impoverishment so often seen in the rest of the world.*

*They had the evenest of tempers, the most perfect patience and good nature – one of the most impressive about them all was the absence of irritability.*

*There was something to their criticism. The years of pioneering lay far behind them. Theirs was a civilization in which the initial difficulties had long since been overcome. The untroubled peace, the unmeasured plenty, the steady health, the large goodwill and smooth management which ordered everything, left nothing to overcome.*

*They found themselves in an immediate environment, which was agreeable and interesting, and before them stretched the years of learning and discovery, the fascinating, endless process of education.*

*“Have you no respect for the past? For what was thought and believed by your foremothers?” “Why no,” she said. “Why should we? They are all gone. They knew less than we do. If we are not beyond them, we are unworthy of them – and unworthy of our children who must go beyond us.”*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1915)

The three explorers are at first ‘imprisoned’ in the country. But it is not a normal prison; it is a very nice place, clean and surrounded by teachers; teachers who are eager to learn about the world outside the boundaries of Herland and eager to teach the language, history and philosophy of Herland. The novel is a description of this learning process and contains a comparison between the two places, Herland and outside of Herland, of every aspect of society from handling of criminals, health and illness, child-rearing, food, clothes, poverty, strife, religion, marriage, etc.

This leads to an increasing embarrassment of the three explorers, who were actually quite proud of their American homeland at first. But with this country of wise, selfless people, it is quite clear how many opportunities of 2000 years of development have been foregone, how much a country could have developed, had it not been for the recurring wars, strife and conflict, in essence by its lack of ability to control the fear and hatred. These emotions were maybe also stirred at some point in the Herland race, but the highest effort is made to ensure a safe and nourishing environment for the children and great energy is put into improving the children’s learning processes. The aim is that learning is not felt like a difficult obstacle that children have to overcome, but rather as an explorative and

playful joyful activity of childhood. By this ‘process’ of always improving everything and not holding old beliefs in unquestionable esteem, the country develops as they overcome everything that seems to counter their increasing sense of morality and community. The people and the society described are in essence healthy, serene and in strong integrity with the prevailing ‘theory of life’.

As to the relationship to nature and the environment:

*‘Here was evidently a people highly skilled, efficient, caring for their country as a florist cares for his costliest orchids.*

*... a land in a state of perfect cultivation, where even the forests looked as if they were cared for; a land that looked like an enormous park, only it was even more evidently an enormous garden.*

*All we found moving in those woods, as we started through them, were birds, some gorgeous, some musical, all so tame that it seemed almost to contradict our theory of cultivation – at least until we came upon occasional little glades, where carved stone seats and tables stood in the shade beside clear fountains, with shallow birdbaths always added.*

*The practical result was like that in any healthy forest; an increasingly valuable soil was being built, instead of the progressive impoverishment so often seen in the rest of the world.*

*They loved their country because it was their nursery, playground, and workshop – theirs and their children’s. They were proud of it as a workshop, proud of their record of ever-increasing efficiency; they had made a pleasant garden of it, very practical little heaven; but most of all they valued it – and here it is hard for us to understand them – as a cultural environment for their children.’*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1915)

After reading the story, it also exists a bit in the mind of the wondering reader. Wondering if this could have been a possibility, wondering if we have wasted 2000 years of opportunity for much greater progress, wondering what stands in the way for really applying similar continuous and conscious processes of dedicated mild and balanced improvement. The novel raises questions about some of the basic premises of our world mindsets, so basic that we are surprised when having them pointed out. The reader wonders how easily we have accepted detrimental concepts as ‘natural laws’ when they are really not. A thing that made me laugh was her comment: ‘The tradition of men as guardians and protectors [of women] had quite died out. These stalwart virgins had no men to fear and therefore no need of protection’.

What Charlotte Perkins Gilman is describing is not so much a country without men, as it is a country that has not been driven by egoic principles. A country where a dedicated communal mindset has worked for generations on improving the process of growth of people from birth and onwards. It is about nurturing an inquiring mind, a free mind that works for the joy of it and for further improvement.

In Herland, the inhabitants take care of nature as they are part of it. Their planning and doing always have the benefit of the long term in mind. The long term of

generations ahead. In Herland, they have the expression of ‘loving up’ – as in contrast to ‘loving down’. The concept of motherhood is described as:

*I don't mean the underflannels-and-doughnuts mother, the fussy person that waits on you and spoils you and doesn't really know you; I mean the feeling that a very little child would have, who had been lost – forever so long. It was a sense of getting home; of being clean and rested; of safety and yet freedom; of love that was always there, warm like sunshine in May, not hot like a stove or a featherbed – a love that didn't irritate and didn't smother.*

*There you have it. You see, they were Mothers, not in our sense of helpless involuntary fecundity, forced to fill and overfill the land, every land, and then see their children suffer, sin, and die, fighting horribly with one another; but in the sense of Conscious Makers of People. Mother-love with them was not a brute passion, “a mere instinct”, a wholly personal feeling; it was – a religion.*

*To them, the country was a unit – it was theirs. They themselves were a unit, a conscious group; they thought in terms of the community. As such, their time-sense was not limited to the hopes and ambitions of an individual life. Therefore, they habitually considered and carried out plans for improvement which might cover centuries.*

*They applied their minds to the thought of God and worked out the theory that such an inner power demanded outward expression. They lived as if God was real and at work within them.*

*Every woman of them placed motherhood not only higher than other duties but so far higher there were no other duties, one might almost say.'*

Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1915)

It is clear from my work with water stewardship that in the society we have built over the last hundreds of years, we have come to a point in history where it is necessary to think long and hard about water stewardship. When swimming in the ocean, steadily working to keeping my head over water, or standing in a fiord where the waves try to overthrow me or when I see the miracle of water added to the garden after a long dry summer, I wonder: ‘am I going to be a steward for water?’ Water has its own powers that are much greater than mine. Hence, water stewardship is not a ‘cuddly nursing kind of care’. When understood from a mothering perspective, as Gilman suggest, things get clearer. The stewardship is for all living, and an important guiding principle is to make a world for our children. Not just *my* children, but for all children on Planet Earth now and moving forward. From that point of view, water stewardship is about respect, humility and thankfulness.

**Your reflections:** What does your imaginary utopia look like?