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Lionel Tiger - pursuing pleasure

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Is pleasure good for us? Could we survive without it? Andrew Denton uses food for fuel but others enjoy savouring the flavours. Who's better off? Lionel Tiger is professor of anthropology at Rutgers University and has written a scientific analysis of the pleasant response. Food, smell, warmth, sex, music: what do they really mean to us as animals?

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Transcript

Robyn Williams: This is *In Conversation*, I'm Robyn Williams, and this evening, I'm here to give you pleasure, at least a book about it. *The Pursuit of Pleasure* is written by a tiger - nice to talk to a tiger for a change. This one is Lionel Tiger, who's Professor of Anthropology at Rutgers University in New Jersey, and you may recall his pronouncements on men in groups, the best size for teams in sport and business, and other 'down home' interpretations of human biology.

So, now, Lionel Tiger - why pleasure?

Lionel Tiger: Well, I got tired of everyone looking at biology, human evolution, as some sort of nasty thing in which we were all hitting each other on the head with great large objects; or oppressing women, or oppressing men, or doing whatever foul thing we are alleged to have been doing all this time. And it seemed to me you could not operate a complex species like ours on push alone. And the Marxist actually developed the idea of scarcity as the animating attitude that got everything going; all history is the history of class struggle and so on.

And it just seemed to me not quite plausible, because we're a very elegant, complex, enthusiastic and inventive species, and it seemed to me that one should try to look at the pleasure centres of various kinds as an index of what we did in order to get on, to survive. And so obviously one focuses on sex, and one focuses on conviviality, one focuses on the pleasures of parenthood and love and all of that, and put together this book, which actually had I think had quite a nice response from the author's point of view - the author being me - because people suddenly said hey, you know you don't always have to have a mean spirited approach to human evolution you can look at it as a sunny time which generated wonderful us - and that was the story.

Robyn Williams: Let's start with sex, always a good place to start. If you look around at some of the other animals, I've often been puzzled for example, by looking at a cockerel standing on the back of a chicken and I can't quite see where the pleasure comes in there. Nor, may I say, with gorillas, who I think last, is it 12 seconds? We

seem to be built to have prolonged pleasure from sex with seasons in the female being more or less shelved. Is that clearly different from other animals?

Lionel Tiger: Well, first of all, we do have seasonality in the female, both preference and frequency, so we haven't lost that at all as a matter of fact. One of the consequences of the birth control pill turns females pregnant so they don't become pregnant, and that affects the routines of sexuality. But as for the extended pleasure, I think here we see something that nature has given females as an opportunity to evaluate the care and thoughtfulness of a male, and it provides some sense of the decency of a mate, to be able to provide pleasure as well as to receive it. And I think we underestimate the skill with which, if we look at the Karma Sutra and all the Japanese stuff, the skill with which both men and women have been more than happy to spend as much time in the sack as they possibly could. It happens to be one of the exhilarating features of the species and we're just better at a lot of things than other animals.

Robyn Williams: Yes, well, in fact, Roger Short calls us a sexy ape - do we get far more pleasure than, as far as is known, most other animals from sex?

Lionel Tiger: Well the bonobos, small chimps, they use sex for all kinds of purposes: in order to solve an office disagreement with the superior they mutually masturbate or they do female/female sex - they are just endlessly involved in sex as a source of social lubrication. We don't do that except...actually we do a fair amount, but it's usually now illegal and inappropriate. The fact is that all you have to do is pick up any magazine that's not selling sofas and you will find sex raring its beautiful head.

Robyn Williams: In terms of evolution, have we reached, if you like, the zenith in that respect, because with many other animals, they really do spend rather less time on this sort of sexual byplay?

Lionel Tiger: They do in part because, for example, with some of the other primates, if you're a male you'd better be quick because some other male may come and beat you up. And a female also who may have another mate wants to just get the hell out of there because she might get beat up if she's with the wrong chap. So we tend to segregate sex into a relatively protective environment, usually in private, because it's first of all a dangerous time, you're preoccupied with something other than self-protection and so we've developed certain ideas about it. And of course, controlling sexuality is one of the great jobs of any social system and certainly religions have weighed in on this and have all sorts of great theories about how we should or should not behave, sexually.

Robyn Williams: Yes, what do you make of the fact that over centuries sexual pleasure in the female was actually denied until quite recent times?

Lionel Tiger: It was denied officially; unofficially, I doubt very much if it was as fully denied as one would gather from the relevant reports. Remember, most of the reports were written by men and so one didn't get to ask women what went on Tuesday morning, you know, just before they went off gathering.

Robyn Williams: Turning to food, which is not a million miles away from sex, are we more or less equivalent, males and females, in our response to good food, do you think?

Lionel Tiger: There appears to be a difference with respect to meat or with respect to the preparation of meat. And here it becomes rapidly anecdotal. So for example, in Australia, as in North America and parts of the industrial world, men seem to like to BBQ. Now maybe this is one of the things that females concede they can actually do. It is not exactly rocket science as they say. In any event there may be a sex difference in preference because males have different metabolic needs, more calorie needs. Females may have, certainly depending on their menstrual cycle and their reproductive cycle, may have other needs.

Actually, I was told by a chef that one of the things they discovered was that women look at the menu to choose their dessert before they choose anything else. And so what smart restaurants now do is don't give you the dessert menu up front because they may want people to have two courses before dessert.

Robyn Williams: I wondered why they did that yes, interesting.

Lionel Tiger: Yes, it's very clever but it's empirical market research. In any case yes, there may be a sex difference and one of the things I'm interested in here in the beef and lamb industry is why, if it's so, and I think it is, women have elected not to feed their children beef because somehow they've gotten the impression that it's not good for them. Whereas in fact if we look at the Australian beef model it's lean beef, unlike the American pattern which can be up to 36% animal fat, the Australian is much lower, as low as 7% or so. And the consequence of that is that it's a very healthy quote/unquote 'natural' food. I hate using the term natural because it usually applies to things which are unsavoury and inedible, but in this case it's a natural food, it's what we evolved to eat, it's what gives us a whole series of substances, omega 3s and other...stearic acid and all kinds of things that have turned out to be, on careful research, to be very benign for our bodies.

Now hardly surprising this, since our bodies evolved eating that and we are a species that's just the food it eats, and what we ate before is what we presumably should eat now. And this doesn't include a lot of the industrial foods that are now part of the diet; things that come out of a pipeline, for example.

Robyn Williams: When it comes to what we used to eat, what we ate before, as you say, in the jungle, in the forest, out on the plain, was it not the case that you had a very limited range. And when you examine, for instance, the sort of things that they see displayed by anthropologists who, having analysed, if you like, what's left over in the midden, or sometimes even what they find in the gut remains, it's, you know, a bunch of seeds, the teeth ground down because there was so much grit in what was being eaten, and the odd kill. It wasn't this sort of immense range that's available for us to savour.

Lionel Tiger: Well, first of all, on the question of the kill, it varies enormously. One of the first studies of hunter/gatherers was done among the Bushmen. Well, the Bushmen have been pushed out of any sensible environment for hundreds of years

and they're not a model. Indeed, many of the groups that have been studied currently, hunter/gatherers, are living in very lousy places and they can't kill, it would be like trying to hunt in the middle of Sydney. So we shouldn't use the few remaining hunter/gatherers as an example of what we were able to do during a time when there were many, many more animals, very few people and so the ecological balance was much more favourable in the direction of, for example, getting a kill. And if you got a kill, well that could feed you for a couple of days, so you'd eaten till you dropped literally, because there was no refrigeration, nobody had figured out how to salt things and do all that. You couldn't cook things, so you ate until you just couldn't eat any longer, and then you slowly digested and then went back to work when you were hungry again.

But it was a critical factor in animating social activity as well as nutritional, because hunting is difficult, it requires great skill: you have to understand the animals, you have to understand the dynamics of the group, who's good at what, who's fast, who's slow. But if you go the caves of France - I was very fortunate to be able to go to Lascaux before it got effectively closed - you see the extraordinary interest that these people had in the animals.

Robyn Williams: Yes, the cave paintings, yes.

Lionel Tiger: Yes, it's amazing, because these were features of their emotional and sensual and aesthetic environment which were very, very real to them - as they should have been, because it was dinner. And so it's not a great surprise that animals loomed large, and if you look at religion, sacrifice of animals is always important; there are usually taboos about when you can eat this and when you could not eat that. Animals have been very important to us. As a matter of fact we love animals and I don't know about here, but in the United States virtually every second person has a pet. Now having a pet in an urban environment is absurd. And how careful we are about feeding pets is simply indicated by going to a supermarket and measuring the shelf space given to pet foods; it's probably the same as to human biscuits. Now people love their biscuits but they never taste pet food and yet they have some idea that they should feed their pets very, very effectively. And that's because sharing food has always, again, been vital for *Homo sapiens*.

Robyn Williams: Yes, but there still seems to be a gap between the sort of situation you describe, where you go out for a kill and you eat the same flesh for two or three days, and the tremendous capacity we have to savour things. Now in the old days, surely, as we see in any kind of natural history film, the imperative, especially for something that's carnivorous or semi-carnivorous, you're driven by hunger as much as, Oh let's go and get some of that nice piquant flavour that we enjoyed with the wheat germ last time.

Lionel Tiger: We're omnivorous not carnivorous. We'll eat anything and that's plain, and we're very good at creating foods or responding to foods that will have some scintilla of value to us. We're very experimental, we'll try almost anything and when we find that something works then we use it. I was at a restaurant yesterday, which had Belgium beer and there was some description of a particular beer made naturally by Belgium monks. I don't know why they have a monopoly on this, but there's one particular ingredient that is grown in about two or three hectares just outside of

Brussels and obviously they protect that little berry because that creates the taste of the beer. Well, that's quite an extraordinary accomplishment.

Robyn Williams: Yeah, it's amazing.

Lionel Tiger: It is amazing and we're amazing. And what has happened is that we forget how amazingly natural we are, given that we've evolved for all this period, and we tend to get bemused by industrial artefacts, which in fact are amazingly improper to eat. For example, if you look at the ingredients of a raspberry shake at one of the fast food places - there's not a raspberry within miles, it's all chemical. Well, that doesn't seem to me to be sensible, and it's quite clear if we look - and currently newspapers are full of this - at the obesity issue, which is arising very rapidly for both adults and now sadly for children, young children, then we see that we're doing the wrong thing, and we've got to understand that natural food is fine, organic, this becomes a kind of cult, but we've lurched from two extremes. One is to see food as poison; it's going to kill you to eat this, and the other is to see food as a pharmaceutical; if you eat this you'll live forever. So if you only eat mung beans you'll live for 8 - 9000 years, or at least it'll seem like that.

So we have to have a more measured sense it seems to me, of what the importance of food is to our lives. And at this point, while we have the abundance you've describe and we have an extraordinary aesthetic power and skill that we have, we also have some pathologies, principally focussed on sugar and fine grains, which have proven to be very unfortunate.

Robyn Williams: Yes, I'm reminded of some of our dogs, you mentioned pets, who can Hoover down a plate of food in seconds and these days with the family meal almost in some places a matter of history, young people especially are having their food walking down the street whilst making a mobile phone call. Hoovering it down in a similar sort of fashion.

Lionel Tiger: Well that is a poignant and rather desperate image. You can even have a more refined version of that, which is the family meal in which with the microwave six people have six different meals. And if I were in charge of a large family I would say everyone has whatever they're going to have, and they share it, and there will be a variety of things, so if you don't particularly like X you can have Y, but there is a common meal and I think that that's so important to human beings. Because we're a sharing species, that to avoid doing that in the interest of what's called time saving or convenience, it's absurd, and in fact a dangerous contribution to our ill health in the long run.

Robyn Williams: It's amazing, many years ago - it must be about 20 years ago, I interviewed in the capital in Washington, Senator George McGovern, famously presidential candidate, and he'd done a survey of food in the United States and eating habits and even then he was decrying the fact that the family meal had gone. Have things changed? Is there a movement to push it in the other direction yet?

Lionel Tiger: It's probably a class thing. The survey done by the meat and lifestyle group suggests that some 45% of Australians eat alone at least once a day, and that strikes me as rather sad. It's always seemed to me very important how one eats, with whom one eats, where one eats, under what circumstances and, of course, what the

quality of the food is. But that's something that some people have begun to rediscover and there's some effort to have family meals from time to time, if not daily. But it's a measure of our despair that we eat things out of paper bags and out of little plastic things we have to cut open with scissors. Not wise, and clearly, given the nutritional system at the moment, not sensible.

Robyn Williams: So - food, sex. And the other pleasures? Well, there's music, there's sound, there's love of landscape, do you cover these?

Lionel Tiger: Yes in fact, if you're in a hospital and you're recovering from a particular operation, if you have a view of a meadow you'll get out of there faster than if you're looking at a brick wall. House plants are another absurdity, rather like pets, but they do restore the Palaeolithic to us, and people like to have houseplants around because it's comfortable and it's reassuring, and there are some health benefits because it oxygenates the air and whatever. But we seek our pleasures and they can be apparently very simple. Just a park, you don't have to be genius to figure out people like parks and if you look at the real estate values, people love to pay to look at a park. They also like to be near water. Well why? So our pleasures are fairly strongly etched into our portfolio of options and it seems to me that food is obviously one of those, as are landscape and flowers and other humans and pets and...

Robyn Williams: Music, what about music?

Lionel Tiger: Music, it's remarkable how pervasive music has now become. Remember it used to be a court entertainment and a folk entertainment; when people got a bit boozy at a wedding then the locals would start playing. But now it's everywhere. Now there's a problem though, if you see people walking down the street with an iPod; at first it sounds like a good idea, but I just gave a talk to a bunch of people in the Nappa Valley on wine and I said, you know, wine is a wePod, because you always share wine and I think that the wePod is a more generous view of *Homo sapiens* than the iPod.

Robyn Williams: There is a trend, in certain religions especially, to deprive us of these pleasures. What do you think about the risks that we face when we deny people these apparently natural pleasures, which are fundamental to us?

Lionel Tiger: A very important question. The issue of religion has become in my opinion, I'm clearly not a religious person, a toxic issue, and when you decide that you're going to organise your daily life and if you can get to it, the daily lives of others, based on some notion you have of a god which you read about in a book which who knows where it comes from, then I think you've got an extraordinarily dangerous situation. It's rather like a bunch of trapeze artists working without the law of gravity - where do they go, what happens, how can you predict? And from that point of view the issue you raise is absolutely central now, and in fact a colleague who is a neuropsychiatrist and I have tried to look at what is the neurophysiology of belief because it's become a staggering issue now.

Robyn Williams: It's a means of control, is it not?

Lionel Tiger: Well it certainly is a means of control and it's so fascinating that the Ten Commandments are largely thou shalt nots, and that's a measure of the imagination of those that decided to write those things. It's too bad, and I can't for the life of me understand for example...communities will build cathedrals at great expense - now what is the function of the cathedral? A cathedral is a place where you go once a week where somebody tells you you're bad, you're doomed, you're never going to make it unless, unless you listen to just my little piquant message which tells you what you can't do.

I think it's extraordinary. And the fact that this goes on forever is an indication of some design imperfection in *Homo sapiens* which makes us far less sapiens than we care to think.

Guests

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