

EROS, POWER, AND THE VIRTUOUS WOMAN

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Abstract

The Conservative call for a return to “family values” is contextualized by Wendy Shalit’s essentialist critique of laissez-faire constructivist attitudes toward sexuality in the light of biology and evolutionary psychology. Somewhere between Foucault’s post-modern theories of sexuality on the one hand, and the theories and research of Sarah Hrdy and Robert Wright, on the other, there is a confluence of biological, spiritual, psychological and social factors, which cannot be separated, interacting to produce human sexuality. Current sexual mores are traced back to their biological and historical roots. Groundwork for an alternative sexual morality is posed, based not on controlling bodies as commodities, but on a process view of Eros and Gilligan’s Care-based values, thus placing sexual morality in a relational framework.

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"The flesh knows better than the spirit what the soul has eyes for."

Diane DiPrima, Loba

Sexual morality. The phrase smells of mothballs and repression, chastity and the missionary position. It takes me back to an era I would rather not revisit, where purse-lipped nuns looming in large black habits warned little girls to avoid reflective patent leather shoes, lest little boys look up their dresses. I remember rumors of bad girls who paid the price for "going too far," furtive feels in the back seats of cars, whispers about "homos" and "lezzies," and dormitory debate on the meaning and consequences of "going all the way." I remember feeling superior to all that as I claimed my newfound sexual freedom in the Age of Aquarius.

Yet decades after the so-called sexual revolution was supposedly won, Puritan purveyors of private morality are once again dominating our public discourse. Starting with Bill Clinton cast as an alpha male Hester Prynne, the inquisitors have been hard at work. They claim that standards of whom we sleep with under what conditions form the cornerstone of society; that unless we rigidly regulate such behaviors, we will find ourselves in a moral quagmire leading down the slippery slope to social and moral decay. Do we a sexual moral code? Most people seem to think so.

Such personal concerns are apparently of greater importance to many Americans than public policy. In the 2004 Presidential election, when Americans said they voted on issues of "moral values," they were referring not to the moral values violated by the killing and

mutilating of innocent people by cluster bombs. Rather, they were invoking a specific, narrow set of sexual norms, called “Family Values,” centered on upholding monogamous, heterosexual marriage and family as the only legitimate choice for sexual expression and life style.

As a Progressive and a feminist, I often find myself impatient with such seemingly trivial issues in the face of what I deem to be much larger ones. Yet, rather than fading away in our more sexually enlightened age, these concerns are becoming more prominent. Why is sexual morality of such grave import to so many people? Why do we care what people do with their genitals? What is there to fear in the relationship of anyone with anyone, so long as both parties are consenting adults?

What does this resurgence of arcane moral standards portend? Are current trends a last-ditch attempt of the patriarchy to maintain control of the means of reproduction, or merely a diversionary tactic to distract us from the pillaging of our world in the name of global economy? If so, why are we so easily distracted by issues of sexual mores? Is our Puritan heritage resurfacing? Is venomous hatred for “different” sexualities explicable as a projection of fear and bitterness resulting from repression of instincts? Or is something more involved? What, after all, is the big deal about sex?

There is something in the simple exchange of human body fluids that holds us in its thrall with overwhelming power. It has brought down civilizations, caused people to commit suicide, homicide, mayhem, and mutilation, burn heretics and witches, raise or abandon families, create masterpieces, develop elaborate codes of conduct with terrible penalties, sign and break lifetime contracts, risk their lives, sanctify, signify, covenant, mystify, brag, write symphonies, start wars, hide themselves in shame, and hide their partners behind walls and veils.

What is it we seek and fear so overwhelmingly in physical intimacy? Is its power over our lives and emotions socially created, or is there something intrinsic to the sharing of bodies?

Is it possible that feminists have overlooked something in our grand vision of equality and free love? Let's consider recent work by a Conservative feminist and a feminist primatologist. *In a Return To Modesty*, Wendy Shalit argues that by insisting on sameness of appetites and feelings in women and men, women have lost, not gained, power. We have become sexual fodder¹, having sacrificed the freedom of choice afforded us by modesty: that of selecting a mate on our own terms and timing from among properly decorous suiters.*This may be women's most important choice, evolutionarily speaking, according to feminist primatologist Sarah Hrdy. "By the end of the twentieth century sociobiologists had revealed that ... Females were the genetic custodians of the species, and through their mate choices—when permitted—directed the course of evolutionary change."²

Shalit asserts that the sexual revolution and the revocation of male protection have been devastating to women, to the socialization of men, and to relations between the sexes in general, as well as negatively impacting women's role in natural selection. While she romanticizes the past (as only a young woman, who didn't live through it, could do), she makes a disturbing point. As ideals of sexual equality overturned modesty, ditched paternalism, and kicked its companion, chivalry, out the door, women are now reaping a harsh harvest of unvarnished misogyny. Susan Faludi corroborates that this new freedom has men feeling not liberated, but extraneous, "stiffed" by the economy, by women, and by the culture, reduced to a mere "ornamental masculinity." Men who are not needed by their

¹ Shalit, Wendy, *A Return to Modesty*, New York: Touchstone Books, 2000

* Such choices romanticized and universalized by Shalit to apply to all women, were in fact the province of a small percentage of women of a certain class. However, Shalit's point is that all women have now lost that privilege.

² Hrdy, Sarah Blaffer, *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1999, p.42

women or their society may feel castrated and shamed, angrily demanding a place in the scheme of things.³

Faludi and Shalit, both feminists, have boldly raised heretical questions regarding the unexpected side effects of the feminist and sexual revolutions of our lifetime. But solutions lie elsewhere. So let us look beyond modesty and masculinity. In the the discussion of the differing views of feminism and whether it has robbed us of our sexual heritage and power, it is even more pressing to consider the larger context of social morality in general, and what part sexual morality should play. We are not speaking merely of the narrow context of sexual relations, then. We are speaking to the core of a cultural schism surrounding moral and sexual values.

It should not surprise us then, that both women and men report feeling disoriented or even enraged by their displacement and newfound freedom. Standing on the battle field in the aftermath of the war between the sexes, we see it is strewn with bodies: broken families and communities, cynical, hurt, and angry women, lost, confused, and broken men, and little girls sodomized on playgrounds where once pigtail pulling was high crime⁴. No wonder we feel nostalgia for a lost or imaginary past. No wonder we romanticize “better times,” from ancient matriarchies to Pleasantville. After our grand revolution, both women and men are lost, cast adrift without a moral anchor, with no land in sight. The old rules don’t work in this new age, and we have no new ones. Perhaps it is time to rethink our position on sexual morality.

The way in which we deal with embodied love is emblematic of the way in which we deal with life and the sacred. As I examine the issues that I consider more pressing, I find that these concerns, too, are concerns of bodies. They involve people whose bodies are vulnerable to rain and cold because they are on the street, animals and people whose bodily

³Faludi, Susan, *Stiffed*, New York: Harper Collins, 1999

⁴ Shalit, 2002, p.19

pain and humiliation is ignored for the comfort and greed of others, and the rape of the body of our mother Earth. These sins against our fellow creatures are not incidental to a sexual ethic and theology that involves suppression and even hatred of the body. Also not incidentally, they are connected to the subordination and hatred of women, who have come to be closely identified with the urges, vulnerabilities and necessities of the body.

Conservative Armegeddonists treat bodies, whether the body of our living planet, our own bodies, or the bodies of other living creatures, as if they do not matter because they are mere matter. Secular consumerism treats bodies as machines having no spiritual value but, ironically, as all that matter, as advertising and reality television encourage us to glut ourselves into oblivion in a nihilistic orgy of feeding and comfort. The body/spirit antagonism of the past two thousand years of Western thought has served neither well. We are estranged from ourselves in body and soul. To heal we will need to re-inhabit our bodies, re-embody our habitat. Bodies matter, and so does the way in which we relate to them sexually.

Of course, we must be extremely wary of judging some forms of sexual expression superior to others, implying thereby that some sorts of people are superior to others. There are many forms of sexual expression. Certainly passing judgment can be dangerous. On the other hand, not speaking at all is leaving us in a moral lurch. We cannot have a civil society without judgement and a willingness to draw some lines in the sand. To refuse to do so puts Progressives in the untenable position Conservatives alledge: that of condoning everything, or reducing all moral choices to a matter of personal taste.

I recall an advice column I read once. A fourteen-year-old girl asked whether it was O.K. to sell her sexual favors for money. She said that her parents told her that she had to decide such things for herself. But on what basis was she to decide? Her feelings? Peer pressure? Profit motive? She had no experience with the nature of sexual energy. Her parents had apparently given her no ground or tools by which to make such a decision, and

no way of identifying her interests. “Our well justified fear of interfering in other people’s business has resulted in a sad, and little remarked-upon reality: that a girl, when she is making this choice—when she is deciding what kind of woman to become and how to handle the men who appear in her life—can expect virtually no guidance...And when it comes to teaching boys how to treat women, they for the most part will be left alone, too.”⁵

What then do feminists teach our children about sex? Our refusal to admit difference and place sanctions puts our daughters, who are more susceptible to pregnancy and more so than males to disease, as well as to emotional injury, in the dangerous position of not feeling justified in saying “no.” This position could be costing young women their emotional health, their social power, and their physical wellbeing⁶. Speaking personally, I would not want a daughter of mine to model herself after a Britney Spears, the prototype teen sex goddess.

Genetic interest in the reproductive health and success of their offspring is inherent in parents. For humans in a developed nation, genetic advantage means making a larger investment in fewer children⁷, hence females employing more selectivity in their choice of sexual partners. This translates to society having a special interest in the sexual behavior of young women, who have the larger stake in any sexual encounter, and therefore have the most to lose.⁸

From this perspective, the Conservative response to the breakdown of standards is understandable. For Conservatives like Promise Keepers*, it means patriarchal control. “Like other high-status male primates...(they are) intent on controlling when, where, and how females belonging to (their) species reproduce.”⁹ Progressives have abdicated all

⁵ Shalit 2000, p.76

⁶ Shalit, 2000, pp. 7-58

⁷ Hrdy 1999, pp. 7-10

⁸ Wright, Robert, *The Moral Animal*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, pp. 33-54

* The Promise Keepers is a national Evangelical organization of men coming together in large stadiums, “reclaiming” their “God-given” right to lead their families. It must be noted that it does keep them from straying.

⁹ Hrdy 1999, p.6

responsibility for setting standards of sexual conduct. Unfortunately Conservatives are only too willing to step into the breach and do it for us. Reproductive behavior and the control of bodies lies at the very heart of social order, and the Conservatives know it. If women do not want men controlling our bodies, we had best devise and employ guidelines for self-management and the management of relations with men to our advantage. We need some principles and tools for managing this potent force we call sex, even if it is not a set of rules and “thou shalt not’s.”

Perhaps it is time to examine some of the arguments coming from the Right, and to dialogue with their criticism, in order to develop a feminist, relational sexual morality. Perhaps it is time to propose a code to guide and empower our children’s behaviors beyond “if it feels good do it, but use a condom.” Surely it is time to incorporate what we have learned from thirty some years of women’s research and social observation, which points unequivocally to women and men having different needs and interests in the sexual arena, which may preclude simple parity. It is time to rediscover erotic love, a love that could reunite body and spirit.

Sex and Eros

What do we mean by sexuality? Sexuality, which we will define simply as the ways in which someone is sexual, is actually a composite of biological drives, genetic proclivities, early childhood relationships, personal choices, and social norms.

We are born with drives toward all kinds of pleasure, located in a variety of pleasure centers throughout our bodies. Freud termed this polymorphous perversity: the undifferentiated infant impulse toward pleasure. These drives are defined and directed toward particular kinds of relationships, interactions, and pleasure centers, based on our earliest relationships. In these early relationships we set the patterns for our most

fundamental attitudes toward drives, bodies, intimacy, and selves. Early childhood socialization is not a mere matter of learning to repress impulses; it is a matter of giving shape and direction to undifferentiated, unformed potential. Thus our sexuality initially forms in our primary socializing unit, the family, usually most intensely in relation to the first love object and caregiver, our mother.¹⁰ Depending on how that bond plays out, we are secure or insecure in loving and being loved, in desiring and being desired, and in enjoying the pleasures afforded by living in a body.

At puberty these pleasure drives begin to be directed by hormones and peer pressure toward potentially reproductive sex. This is when most primates begin their reproductive lives, driven by the onslaught of raging hormones that we associate with adolescence. It is only a recent human development and a by-product of women's greater education and freedom, that we postpone childbearing until emotional and mental maturity catch up with physical maturity. In most primal cultures motherhood begins shortly after menses.

Our sexuality as adults is a combination of the basic drive toward pleasure, however it has taken shape, the biological drive toward reproduction, our genetic and emotional proclivities toward same sex or other sex partners, the myriad messages, inclinations, pressures, and opportunities supplied by our world, hormonal fluctuations, and our own choices. These are all tied together with our early infant experiences of ourselves and others, and our genetic programming for reproductive success (the desire of our genes to make it to the next generation).

¹⁰Dinnerstein, Dorothy, *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, New York: Harper and Row, 1977. According to Dinnerstein's radical reading of Freud, for so long as women are the primary caregivers to infants, the ones who imprint the human psyche with the love/food/survival equation, man will both fear and want to own them, as the source of life and love.

When we talk about sexuality, then, we must be aware that sexuality is not a thing that nature supplies whole and complete, which society then conspires to repress or stifle in order to control us. Rather it is a complex and fluid formation of psychodynamic, biological, genetic, social and spiritual urges and behaviors. Social control goes far deeper than repression. The very way in which our drives are directed, the very nature of our impulses toward or away from any sort of relationship, is shaped by society's messages. Sexuality as we know it, and as Michel Foucault showed us in his exhaustive *History of Sexuality*, is actually manufactured and deployed by the forces of Power Over through popular self-help books, pornography, psychological and medical literature, sacred texts, mass media, legal and religious institutions, and sex education both in the classroom and outside it. The discourse defines not only what constitutes acceptable sexuality; *it defines what constitutes sexuality at all.*¹¹ In so defining, it turns what was an uncontrollable force into a manageable thing.

While a natural force cannot be controlled (try to control the tides or the Earth's shifting plates), a thing can be. Isolating sexuality, the urges of the body, from the soul's longing for union, weakens each and makes both the sex drive and the longing for union that fuels and infuses it vulnerable to control and containment by Power Over. Sex, as defined by discourse, is Eros gutted and reified, then slipped into its place. Thus the turning of Eros into a thing through sexual discourse has played a central role in maintaining the body/spirit schism whose existence has been central to the way in which we treat one another and our world.

In this way, Eros, the living force of relatedness, which cannot be owned or controlled, is reified by the sexual discourse, removed from the body, and placed in the mind, under the control of institutions of power. Tamed and reified, wild Eros becomes tawdry, or vanilla, sex, a commodity that can, and is, withheld, deployed, sold, and owned.

¹¹ Foucault, Michel, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol.I, New York: Vintage Books, 1980, Chapter One

The erotic is more than mere sex. It is the wild, natural force that calls us into becoming, as well as the gravitational pull that holds planets together in dynamic tension. It is the god face in all relationality, transcending and grounding any form or particularity in which it may momentarily express. "I have become clearer about the distinctions between the erotic and other apparently similar forces. We tend to think of the erotic as an easy, tantalizing sexual arousal. I speak of the erotic as the deepest life force, a force which moves us toward living in a fundamental way. And when I say living I mean it as that force which moves us toward what will accomplish real positive change."¹² The erotic, by Lorde's definition, is fundamentally relational, putting all of life dynamically in touch with all the rest of life.

Love and Death

Our contemplation of the mystery of bodies together and what happens in the space between them must arise from the same reverence and wonder as love itself. I reach deep into my body in order to be truthful, hoping not to add to the noise of meaningless sexual discourse that takes us further and further from our selves and the sacred. I would write from a place of embodiment, working to embody what I speak, speak what I embody. I fear I am opening Pandora's box or digging a hole to China. I could release more demons than I can cope with. I could be swallowed whole by it. I could lose myself in it. I notice my metaphors: "Pandora's box. Demons. Swallowed whole." The fears I encounter as I approach this writing are the same fears we encounter as we move toward another in intimacy. Perhaps we will release our demons, lose control, be swallowed up in the union. Perhaps we will never get ourselves back.

¹² "Audre Lorde." *Black Women Writers at Work*, Ed. Claudia Tate. NY: Continuum, 1983. 100-116.

This is frightening. This longing, this melding, is fundamentally destabilizing. We are not in control. Eros is nature's way of shaking things up. What other reason could there be for love, Eros, allurements, "except to stretch the soul and expand the imagination, except to tear things apart and put them back together in new ways?"¹³ Spiritually and genetically something calls us to open, to share, to merge, to release.

Something in the smells and tastes and folds of another's flesh takes us back to the terrifying fulfillment of our infant dreams. In my body I am calling out to another. In his body he answers. In my body I am speaking the name of his soul, with my lips, with my fingertips, with my tongue, with my vulva. His hands shape me. He is different in his body. He answers with his vulnerable tumescent flesh. We could hurt one another if we are not careful. This is not reasonable. We are exposed. We are trusting one another. Sometimes it is difficult or awkward. We have wounds that have not healed. We have layers to shed. With our bodies we are creating relationship, melting walls, entering one another. If we do this well neither of us will be the same afterwards. We will bond. Something irrevocable will have been exchanged.

The act of sexual intercourse, fully performed, is dangerous. It is fleshy. It is holy. It is uncertain and vulnerable. It is wild, fertile, transcendent and transformative. Birth and death lie hidden within its folds, waiting. It is awesome and terrifying to touch another and to allow oneself to be touched, to break down the solid illusion of separate self. This is why violation is so shattering, and why, however much desired, there is always a fleeting sense of violation associated with sexual intimacy. The pattern that we are has been entered, altered. It is not done lightly. This is why we fear and crave intimacy. Safe sex is an oxymoron. Intimacy requires trust because it is not safe. Erotic love is not merely the touching of bodies. In the touching of bodies we experience the touching of souls. We

¹³ Jong, Erika, *How To Save Your Own Life*, New York: Holt, Reinhart & Winston 1977

surrender to Eros, the longing of life itself to reach out to another in allurements and fascination, willing to be transformed by the mystery that transpires.

Eros bonds and transforms the world. It is the unmanageable life force moving among us through embodied flesh, in which we can experience the divine. We are privileged to participate in it. But we must pay to play.

In sexual reproduction our genes go on, transformed, and our current forms are left behind, like the old shell of the stone crab. Our bodies have done their job. They have combined and recombined in new and hopefully stronger variations. Unlike our ancestor the amoeba, which remains the same forever, the individuals of species that reproduce sexually eventually die. In this universe there is no transformation at any level without some kind of death. The price that nature exacts in exchange for the ability to evolve sexually, and the pleasure and bonding that go with it, is our mortality.¹⁴

No wonder it is a frightening prospect to encounter another as a conscious being. We face our own transformation in their eyes, and therefore, at some level, the demise of who we know ourselves to be. Sex and death are evolution's bottom lines, and both are mysterious and ultimately beyond our control. Eros bonds and transforms all life through allurements and fascinations; death claims old forms to make room for new ones. These two movements, Eros and Thanatos, are partners in life's ongoing dance of transformation, allowing evolution to give birth to its wild, unreasonable experiments.

It is no mere *bon mot*, then, that the French refer to orgasm as "*le petit morte*." Perhaps it is "the little death" that prepares us for that final transformation by the universe. They come in evolutionary tandem. They have qualities in common. Both are transcendent bodily experiences. In lovemaking as in death, there is a loss of ego and a loss of control. We are overtaken. Both erotic love and death operate outside the ordinary scope of human will.

¹⁴ Swimme and Berry, *The Universe Story*, San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1992, p.9

Often desire operates beyond our will altogether, as Augustine pointed out with frustration so long ago¹⁵. We are humble in the face of both love and death. We are reminded that we are mortal. It is in the humbling throes of love and death that most mortals have the opportunity to know the fearful, magnificent, transcendent experience of being swept away, if only for a moment, simultaneously alive in our bodies and transcending them.

A Brief History of Sexuality

Perhaps it is out of this desire to rid ourselves of humbling physicality that priests and pornographers have tried for nearly five thousand years to own, destroy, isolate, separate, trivialize, domesticate, harness, market, and manage unmanageable Eros, with its links to birth and death. Alas, to deny death we must also deny, tame, and stifle life.

Most of what we call sexual morality, after nearly five thousand years of sexual discourse (controlled, of course, by those who dominate the institutions of power) is a thinly disguised veneer of patriarchy, sexual politics, and the discourse of Power Over used to shackle unruly Eros for purposes of social control and domination. The wide variety of erotic behaviors available to human beings was funneled into a narrow category of reproductive behaviors called “sex” for purposes of “regulatory control: a biopolitics of the population¹⁶.” as far back as c.2400 B.C.E.¹⁷ This is when the all male assembly of Uruk in Ancient Sumer wrote the first recorded laws dictating (female) sexual behavior: Urukagina’s Code. This document opened the modern sexual discourse on morality, specifying such items as a husband’s right to knock his wife’s teeth out with a brick, should she be unfaithful to him.¹⁸

¹⁵ St. Augustine *City of God, Book XIV, Chapter 16*. It was, in fact, for this reason that Augustine declared lust unholy: because it would not submit to our will and reason, thus condemning generations of Christians to call sexual desire a sin. This viewpoint reveals a Christianized version of Augustine’s former Manichean belief that the mind and body are natural enemies, the mind being good and the body, evil.

¹⁶ Foucault 1978

¹⁷ Kramer, Samuel Noah, *History Begins at Sumer*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1961, p.29

¹⁸ French, Marilyn, *Beyond Power: On Men, Women and Morals*, New York: Random House, 1986, p.98

It may go back even further than that. Primatologist Sarah Hrdy tells us that we cannot comprehend the debate about reproductive rights without understanding that “Passionate debates about abortion derive from motivations to control female reproduction that are far older than any particular system of government, older than patriarchy, older even than recorded history. Male fascination with the reproductive affairs of female group members predates our species”¹⁹

Representational Sexuality

No wonder the agents of social control are trying so hard to lock Eros up and throw away the key! How are we to deal responsibly with such a powerfully destabilizing force? What would happen if women and Eros ran off together in the marketplace?

The post-modern sexual discourse will not help us in our quest to set Eros free. It is time to admit that our sexual fantasies have not liberated us to love. They have incarcerated us further---inside the walls of the discourse that shaped them, wondering why we feel so alone, terrified and desperate to escape.

It will not help our children find their way. Post-modern sexuality is being formed in alienation, by the two-dimensional images of the sexual discourse rather than in the rich soup of human relationship. By the time a young person encounters the Beloved in the flesh of another, his or her sexuality has already been shaped by centerfolds, song lyrics, and MTV. It is not that these images are bad *per se*; it is that they are images rather than life. They represent a reification of elemental human experience. This reification transfers the locus of sexual experience from our bodies and the space between them, to the isolated fantasy worlds of our minds, which are manufactured by Power Over.

Living as we do in a world of representational sexuality, is it any wonder that Power Over has become sexualized in the growing popularity of sado-masochistic practices? It

¹⁹ Hrdy, 1999, p.6

frequently takes such extremes to remove us from the isolation of our minds and situate us in our bodies. Without such extremes we often make ourselves unavailable to real intimacy because it does not correspond to, and even interrupts, the images in our minds, where we are living.

To the extent that our sexuality resides in our minds, a real flesh and blood person with all her or his attendant blemishes is less compelling than a representation. We focus less on the one in our arms than on the images in our head. The Beloved is reduced to a cardboard cutout in an internal fantasy manufactured by the sexual discourse. Sex becomes a thing we have using another, rather than an event that arises in celebration of communion. Virtual sex is not a thing of the future. It exists in the present, in the representational worlds we place as a wall between us.

Eros, on the other hand, is always actual rather than virtual. It resides not in the individual, but rather is generated in the process of relating. Eros exists only in relationship, whether with a person, an object, an action, or with life in general. You cannot pin it down, own it, save it, or guarantee it. Eros is a force, not a thing. Because it is by nature always in flux, subject to and acting upon its subject/ object(s), it is by definition unmanageable. It can neither be controlled nor deployed.

Eros exists not in you or me alone but in the power of what happens in the space between, the holy place of possibility. Like all life it pushes its way through cracks in the pavement, growing on rocks and between bathroom tiles. Eros is a force of the Divine. It erupts when we least expect it, often when it is least convenient, making glorious messes everywhere in our neat little worlds. It can be suppressed, but it cannot be controlled by Power Over.

Redemptive Relationship

What if our sexual ethic honored that mystery between us? What if we acted sexually out of a fundamental recognition of our relatedness to one another and to the life of life? What if we lived every moment of our lives in a state of embodiment? What if we recognized the Beloved in our own bodies and in the flesh of each being we encountered? What if we stood in awe of the potency and sacredness of the force moving through us and between us? How would that affect our sexual behavior?

It would not give us rules that make us behave uniformly in our ways of loving and choosing when and how and whom to love sexually. It would not tell us that heterosexual monogamous marriage is the only way to be sexual. Nor would it promote promiscuity. It would place all our interaction on an erotic continuum, rather than in polarities of sexual vs. non-sexual, (meaning non-genitally sexual). It would really open up Pandora's box with the secret we have known in our bodies and souls all along: all relationships in which we are truly engaged are at some level erotic. Eros is the god-force of relationship. I am erotically alive talking with my colleague about the work we love or laughing with my friend. My cat and I are having an erotic interaction when she rolls over and asks me to rub her belly. I am turned on in my body when I open myself to great art, hear great music, dance, participate in potent ritual or worship, pray, write, paint, or love.

All of these are acts of love when they are done in an embodied state. Yet I do not need to genitalize all of them. Because the popular sexual discourse has created genital sexuality as synonymous with embodied response, there is a tendency to genitalize all erotic feelings. Consequently when a person feels Eros in response to a person or situation in which they would consider it inappropriate to be fully sexual, they are likely to shut it down, shutting down the flow of embodied love between them, or worse, act it out in the only way they know, the way provided by the discourse: genitalization.

In nature there is a great deal of erotic interaction among animals, which is not genitalized. The frequency of intercourse among dogs, for example, as compared to the frequency of rolling and frolicking together, licking, etc., is quite small. Moreover, the erotic behavior is not only heterosexual, nor is it only “foreplay.” It is play, a celebration of life, of relationship, of Eros. If we do not need to sexualize all erotic interaction or genitalize all sexual feeling, we are left with the question of under what conditions and circumstances, and with which persons, it is appropriate and life affirming to be fully sexual. At what level and at what point on the continuum do we act in concert with the authentic nature of each relationship, honoring the power of physical intimacy to bond and shatter boundaries?

When I open my body’s orifices to allow another to enter, great power and vulnerability are released. My partner and I enter deep within each other’s psychic fields, co-mingling our energies. This is not mere superstition. Sex is a complex chemical event that research biochemists are only beginning to understand. It would seem, for example, that the chemicals released by a woman in orgasm are the same chemicals as those released by a new mother bonding with her baby. We bond when we make love. This is natural. My body is not separate from my soul, and my soul is not separate from my chemistry. When I open my heart and soul, I open my body as well; when I open my body, my soul is inevitably involved. If by my actions I am requiring of myself or another to separate body from soul, what might have been an act of intimacy becomes an act of estrangement. This “uniquely female” place referred to by Lorde may be the key to relational morality.

“Women have been taught to suspect the erotic urge, the place that is uniquely female. So, just as we tend to reject our blackness because it has been termed inferior, as women we tend to reject our capacity for feeling, our ability to love, to touch the erotic, because it has been devalued. But it is within this that lies so much of our power, our ability to posit, our

vision. Because once we know how deeply we can feel, we begin to *demand from all of our life pursuits that they be in accordance with these feelings. . . .*²⁰ (Italics mine)

To be able to demand anything from life pursuits, women must have true agency, supported by the culture, to choose when and how to act in accordance with their feelings. Acts of casual sex or violent sex, acts of sexual abuse in which we do not open our souls, or sex in which we are using ourselves or another without permission or presence, are acts which increase estrangement---most of all from ourselves. But we cannot make a rule. For some people full presence is undesirable or impossible with any except a life mate. The archetypal sacred prostitute, on the other hand, was legendary for being able to be fully present with the Beloved in the flesh of the stranger, even the most repulsive of strangers, much as Saint Theresa, known as the Little Flower, made it her spiritual practice to see Christ in the excrement and rotting flesh of the sick and dying. While Theresa was almost certainly not sexual with those she served, hers was a similarly erotic practice and act of love. These practices were not casual. They were committed. They were loving and deeply relational and healing.

In each meeting lives the potential for creation, grace, and redemption. To live morally is to live with a respect for the mystery between and an awareness of the dynamic and potentially creative--- or destructive--- relationship of self to other and to the combined intelligence of the whole, or God. This quality is what the Gospels of Jesus called love, the transcending force that holds the universe together. Embodied, it is the force I am calling Eros.

It is possible to be present and loving with a stranger; it is possible to absent with ones life mate. We cannot make rules based on the number of sexual partners we might take, or on the duration of the encounter. We cannot make rules at all. We can only look at the

²⁰ Lorde, 1983 p. 113

quality of relationship and ask, “Is this interaction affirming the life of those involved and the life of life? Does it increase the odds on love? Does this encounter honor and celebrate Eros?” If so, there are qualities which are more likely than not to be present: mutual regard, caring, choice, shared power, honesty, openness, and most of all, a willingness to be fully present. These are the qualities that would constitute sexual and relational integrity. These are the qualities that make way for the grace event of intimacy, for the flow of erotic love that connects us far beyond our ability to understand or control it.

We do not, we cannot, know or judge what occurs in private moments between lovers. Nor do we know what understandings and compromises may occur over many years in long-term partnership. We can only ask whether what they do is life affirming or life suppressing, and whether it hurts others. In a complex world, it would be a grave mistake to reduce public moral discourse to the level of talk radio, or to allow our Puritan heritage to override our deeper, erotic values of tolerance and compassion.

Perhaps in this crisis of estrangement from one another and our bodies, so painfully being enacted in our nation’s capital, we might find the courage to reclaim Eros. We are at a critical point in our nation’s historical trajectory, in which we will stand for Eros as a moral force, or lose all the gains of the past thirty years to an anti-erotic theocracy rooted in patriarchy, alienation and regulation of bodies.

It is time to re-invent a sexual ethic befitting the post “sexual revolution” world. The real tragedy would be to consent to return to the repressive, patriarchal values of the past, in the absence of an alternative moral structure. If we do not create some moral guidelines that recognize and honor Eros, this powerful force of relationality will likely be mutilated beyond recognition. Eros will reappear disguised as pornography and molestation, whose shadow has haunted us throughout history.

Eros, the mercifully unmanageable force of life’s urge to transform, is bigger than any box we build to contain it, stronger than any system we construct to suppress it. It moves

among and between us in embodied love. We know the Beloved in the flesh, and in holding the fleshy world to be sacred, we embrace our own transformation in both love and death. By declaring that the sacred exists within and through the world of matter, we untie the Gordian knot of the body/spirit split. Like an umbilicus after the blood ceases to pump through it, the cord that bound us for centuries shrivels up and dies. It was illusion. We are whole, and the whole is holy. We dance to the rhythms of its movement in the universal dance of relatedness. Embodied love, in which we recognize the Beloved in the flesh of another, moves from sin to sacrament.

This is the road to true morality: honoring the fullness and integrity of all relations, macro and micro, and acting in accordance with the truth inherent in each and all. Embodied love is sacramental, and it is contained not by heterosexual marriage alone, but in all acts of love, pleasure, truth, and beauty, by respect for the force itself. I imagine a world in which all loving forms of sexual expression are lifted up and celebrated faces of the Divine and nature's variety.

Imagine young women conceiving of their sexual response as a divine offering to a worthy recipient, however and whenever they choose to give it. Imagine men taking joy from the giving of pleasure, honoring each other and women as friends or as lovers, knowing that to touch and be touched is an awesome act of communion. I do not think that in such a world we would need to warn little girls against patent leather shoes or peer pressure to give blowjobs while still in braces. I think that girls might enjoy and assert their right to be sexually different. In the words of Simone de Beauvoir, "There will always be certain differences between a man and a woman; her eroticism and therefore her sexual world, have a form of their own, and therefore cannot fail to engender a sensuality, a sensitivity, of a special nature" to protect her from violence and abuse.²¹ Would this not be

²¹ De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Second Sex*, New York: Random House, 1952, p. 766

the purpose of sexual morality in an era and society in which reproductive success is almost assured: to protect the dignity and relatedness of all?