

The Sacred Fire: *Sexuality and Spirituality*

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An amusing joke crossed my e-mail path recently— “One of God’s messengers was surveying the progress of Western religion. The angel came running back to God’s quarters, out of breath, and reported, “Oh God, the scribes forgot the “R” in the primary teachings. I can’t believe it, what shall we do? They forgot the blessed “R.” The word was supposed to be “CELEBRATE!”

Here, in our liberal religious circle, we tend to get the humor in such a joke. For the most part, we are a religion that celebrates, or at least strives to celebrate, our whole lives and our whole selves; mind and body, flesh and spirit. We affirm and welcome people of all sexual orientations (note the rainbow stripe on our church sign); we promote safe congregations through codes of sexual ethics; in the Our Whole Lives (or OWL) program, we teach our children -- with respect, care, and creativity --the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth about human sexuality-- its beauty and its perversions. We do not equate sexuality with “sin.” We aren’t likely to forget the blessed “R.” Blessed be!

Yet, once again, we UUs are truly unorthodox and atypical in this regard. My colleague Alan Taylor has noted astutely that “Our culture is sexually traumatized. We are bombarded daily by an unnatural, highly commercialized and immature sexuality that exploits and objectifies men and women alike. Advertising, video games, and movies glorify a youth culture that believes sexual people have perfect bodies, are young, and not religious. If children grow up to believe that they should be ashamed or uneasy about their sexuality, consider their developing attitudes of experiencing sexual pleasure or developing healthy relationships?”

This morning, we’ll explore together some of the factors that brought about this neurotic fear of the erotic and the deeply embedded and counterproductive duality between sexuality and spirituality in our mainstream religious culture. And we’ll consider how we might reunite flesh and soul in order to recognize their essential interdependence in fostering whole and full-embodied lives?

Some years ago, the philosopher Paul Ricoeur observed that there have been three major stages in the Western understanding of the relationship of sexual and religious forces. The earliest stage closely linked the two forces, incorporating sexuality into religious myth and ritual, often with a prominent role for female deities. In the second stage, accompanying the rise of Western religions, the two spheres were split. The sacred became increasingly transcendent while sexuality was demythologized and exiled to a small corner of the earthly order, namely procreation within institutionalized marriage. Sexuality’s power – its sacred fire – was feared, restrained, and disciplined. The third phase heralded a reassessment of this split and brought sexuality partially out of that dark corner.

Despite the poetic loveliness of the Song of Songs from Hebrew Scripture (read earlier by Ron and Liz), much of the sexuality in the Old Testament is quite ghastly or manipulative. On the surface, The Song of Songs qualifies unequivocally as erotic poetry, yet its primary objective was to promote a kind of hot monogamy/procreativity for a culture that eagerly engaged in polyamory. Noah’s sons “uncovered his nakedness,” which is a Hebrew idiom for incest; in Genesis, the Egyptian eunuch Potiphar clearly buys Joseph as a sex slave for himself, only to have his wife spend an entire chapter trying to seduce him. Great King David’s son Amnon cunningly and brutally rape his half-sister Tamar, and David dismisses the act with a slight wave of the hand. The prophet Hosea weds a prostitute; Jacob marries for convenience and then lusts endlessly for his sister-in-law. Oy vey!

Jesus doesn’t really have much to say about sexuality. His big themes were love, justice, and compassion. With Saint Paul began the dualism that has marked much of Christian development. Ever since, the loathing of the erotic, sexism and patriarchy have thrived. How did this happen? Beginning with the Church Fathers of the earliest centuries, men have identified themselves with the higher faculties (the spirit/mind) and assigned women the lower

(body/matter), thereby assuming the need to demonize and control them. As a result, Christians have inherited a disembodied notion of piety and salvation. Saints were idealized as asexual beings, without sexual needs or desires, and sometimes even without genitalia.

Often, women were depicted as either virgins or whores; former pagan goddesses were recast as Catholic saints; Brigid for one. What a shift from previous religious that had associated female sexuality with the spiritual. And, how ironic that “God” or “the sacred” was embodied as a woman far longer than God has been a male. During the Reformation of the 16th century, dualism continued to prevail, however marriage was seen as an acceptable means of sexual expression, albeit not quite as holy a state as celibacy or virginity. Yet, Luther still perceived every sexual act as sinful and part of humanity’s fallen nature. Calvin was a bit more progressive in his belief that sex could have constructive effects, but should not be enjoyable.

The repressive bonfires of the Church destroyed many things, but among the most tragic of their victims were the poems of the lesbian writer, Sappho. Sappho's books were burned by Christians in the year 380 A.D. at the instigation of Pope Gregory Nazianzen. Another book burning in the year 1073 A.D. by Pope Gregory VII may have wiped out any remaining trace of her works. Ironically, the matter of her sexual orientation did not become controversial until much later, during the nineteenth and twentieth century. It was not an issue for her contemporaries; it was not even an issue in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, when her poetry started to emerge from obscurity.

The reason that the Church wanted Sappho's works eradicated is not certain, but it probably had something to do with the subject matter of her poems. From the surviving fragments, we know Sappho wrote splendid sensual hymns in praise of the Pagan Goddesses, particularly Aphrodite, and love poetry of great sophistication, passion and deep understanding of the human heart. Such subjects were anathema to the bigots and anti-sensual crusaders of the Dark Ages. Just such an anti-sensual bent which created tension between the flesh and the spirit continues to this day in the orthodox strain of the Western religious traditions.

Examples abound. After all, the burkha, (the full-cover garment worn by devout Muslim women) is not a fashion statement. It is an enforced method of de-sexualizing women so that men will not be tempted towards lustful behavior. Women pay the piper so men can maintain proper restraint. Outrageous! To this day, people (primarily men) with massive control issues want to control the bodies of others. Catholic women with unwanted babies understand this. Gay folks know this all too well. So there we are. An unfortunate legacy, to be sure. Clearly, there is still much work to do.

In the positive column, I remind you of the works of Rumi, the Sufi mystic poet, whose work we celebrated back in November. Here we find a mystical form of Islam that breaks down the wall between flesh and soul, and recognizes the sacred beloved and the role of ecstasy in the religious life. In his poem, One Whisper of the Beloved, Rumi writes:

At times we flow toward the Beloved

Like a dancing stream.

At times we are still water

Held in His pitcher.

At times we boil in a pot

Turning to vapor –

That is the job of the Beloved.

He breathes into my ear
Until my soul
Takes on His fragrance.
He is the soul of my soul –
How can I escape?
But why would any soul in this world
Want to escape from the Beloved?

We find similar paeans to sacred sexuality in the mystical strains of Judaism and Christianity. As we heard earlier in the deeply erotic Song of Songs, each partner delights in the physical presence of his or her lover, and also in the taste, smell, touch, and sound of the lover's being. And listen to these words by the contemplative 14th century mystic Julian of Norwich (a nun, no less!): "Our sensuality is grounded in nature, in compassion, and in grace," she writes. "In our sensuality, God is." You go, girl!

While researching this sermon, I learned many surprising facts; among them, that in the 17th century, some Protestants, especially Anglicans, Quakers, and the Puritans of all people began to affirm that loving companionship, not procreation, is the central message of sexuality. More recently, in an ongoing challenge to their faith's historical dualism, some contemporary Christian theologians have been reframing incarnational theology, too, by offering new interpretation of "the Word made flesh" that suggest sexuality is intrinsic to the experience of God.

Such an experience was described vividly by the writer, Nikos Kazantzakis, in his 1965 book Report to Greco. He writes: "Within me, even the most metaphysical problem takes on a warm physical body which smells of sea, soil, and human sweat. The Word, in order to touch me, must become warm flesh. Only then do I understand – when I can smell, see, and touch." In other words, when religion comes to all of its senses it is most knowable.

Even within Catholicism, a group of progressive scholars proposed back in the early 70s that their Church's sexual ethics stop centering on procreation, natural law and the physical contours or sexual acts, and focus instead on the gospel ethic of love and the creative growth toward personal integration of flesh and spirit. Yet, to no avail. The Vatican shunned this view of sexual expression as self-liberating yet faithful, responsible yet joyous.

I can't help but agree with a wide spectrum of theologians, journalists, and clergypersons who have aptly located some of the current problems besetting the Catholic Church in its history of enforced celibacy for its clergy and its anti-sexual rhetoric. Yes, at one point, celibacy (or the idea of 'transcending sexual impulse') was widely believed to be the only path to true enlightenment among Western and Eastern seekers. Voluntary celibacy is still valued among a variety of religious traditions, yet, the modern consensus is that enforced celibacy hinders rather than hastens spiritual growth and may lead to the type of sexual misconduct that has both rocked the Catholic Church and devastated trusting members of its parishes.

Only time will tell how recent events will impact on the Catholic church's teachings about sexuality or celibacy, or how they will mend the damage done through wide-scale sexual abuse by those empowered to represent holiness. Let us remember to hold our Catholic friends and neighbors in our healing thoughts during this time of trauma and soul-searching.

If we look elsewhere -- to nature-based neo-paganism worldwide and to the East, other paradigms loom that recognize the inherent link between sexuality, sensuality, and spirituality. In Hinduism, for example, the union of the deities Laksmi and Shiva, both in its physical and spiritual dimensions, represents wholeness. Furthermore, the tantric tradition within Hinduism centers on the subtle use of energy within sexuality, thereby infusing physical intimacy with spiritual practice. Tantric workshops have never been more popular apparently.

At their core, I'd argue that sexuality and spirituality are vastly more similar than they are disparate. Each requires us to learn how to respect and honor ourselves and each other as sexual and spiritual beings. Both words embody a person's search for meaning and purpose in relationship to others and to Creation. My colorful colleague, Mark Belletini, pushes the connection to another important and provocative level when he writes:

"Ecstasy and limits, Both of these words frame the spiritual for me equally. Furthermore, both words define the edges of what I would call sacred play. That's right, play. Sexuality and spirituality are both forms of play, and play can forge and heal real relationships. Sexual responsibilities involving boundaries, and spiritual disciplines like yoga or mediation, are equal expressions of what I would call a mature religious education."

The pioneering OWL (Our Whole Lives) program that Chris Kergaravat, Andy Furst, and others teach with such skill and dedication to our 7th graders strives to engender just such an integrated and healthy understanding of flesh and spirit. OWL began in 1968 as a course called About Your Sexuality. Back then, in an era of shame and fear-based sexuality education, our curriculum was considered radical and controversial. Why? -- because its primary goal is providing our youth with the tools to develop healthy attitudes about their sexuality. Yes, OWL (and AYS before it) is known affectionately, if inaccurately, as "the sex course." And we've certainly garnered our share of biased and misinformed publicity as a result. Who can forget Bryant Gumbel nosing around one of our UU churches several years back in search for alleged pornography.

Helena Chapin, one of the developers of AYS and currently a Minister of Religious Education, views OWL as "justice work" in our sex-phobic albeit sex-saturated society. She writes that "when a five-year-old can show off his tow mommies in Sunday School, or our gay youth can discuss what a refuge our religion has provided, or a returning college student can explain the link between self-respect and sexual behavior," we need to see programs like OWL as some of the most important faith education we offer in our Unitarian Universalist congregations. "

Our own Chris Kergaravat tells me: "I never cease to be amazed as I watch our teens, with all the arrogance and self-centeredness that their age entitles them to, turn from peer-pressured copy-cats into thinking, well-informed decision-makers. It is unbelievably fulfilling to be able to witness this transformation, and to think that our church, and I personally, played a role in the blossoming of our youth."

Sure, there are loads of alternatives to OWL: decrepit filmstrips in high school hygiene class; chatting with your local nun; Penthouse magazine's "letters to the editor," teen chat rooms, the Discovery channel, to name just a few. (Is that hyperventilating I hear??) Given the options, methinks we should be doubly, triply grateful for OWL and its intrepid leaders. And, let's face it, having "the conversation" with our adolescent children hasn't gotten all that much easier over the years, as the humorist Dave Barry notes in his column entitled, "SEX AND THE SINGLE AMOEBIA: WHAT EVERY TEEN SHOULD KNOW."

Barry explains: "You cannot keep your children from discovering sex, but you can make it appear to be boring. The way to do this is to sit them down and discuss sex in a very frank manner, the way they did in your high school health class: "The female sexual organs consist of the pupa, the uvula, the medina, hyphen, the sui genesis and the tubes; the male organs consist of the seminole vessel, the vast difference, the pendula and the contrabassoon. During intercourse, the pendula reaches a state of engorgement and is placed in the vicinity of the medina, which responds in kind until both organs have secreted a variety of fluidic substances, at which time withdrawal becomes possible." After a few minutes of this kind of talk, your kids will give up on sex and go back to their computers, and you'll be safe for another week or two."

And, now we come full-circle to the whole point of this sermon in the first place – the notion that a mature, mindful, full-spectrum, fully-embodied and grounded sexuality does not, should not be presented as boring, aberrant or un-spiritual. Just the opposite! We need to cultivate and tend the sacred fire, the heart and the soul of our sexuality, and make it an integrated part of our spiritual and relational lives. We should be encouraged to acknowledge and celebrate our erotic natures. This may be tough if we were raised with more restrictive religious views, some of which are hard to completely shake.

I hope you will try. Because in order to grow and to thrive, we need to understand mindful sexuality as a powerful embodiment of love; to frame sexuality as crucial to our holistic health as beings, who are not meant to live in isolation or loneliness, but rather require equal measures of communion and contemplation, passion and play and prayer, in order to experience the fullness of a human life.

In the acclaimed Toni Morrison novel, Beloved, the impassioned but world-weary character Baby Suggs knows this truth down to her marrow. “In this here place,” she explains, “we flesh. Flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard... Love your hands! Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face...You got to love it, you! This is flesh I’m talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved.”

So may it be.

Amen.