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Tending the Sacred Fire Sexuality and Spiritual Direction

"The sexual and spiritual parts of the human personality," Scott Peck said, "lie so close together that we cannot arouse one without arousing the other." As the words penetrated, I sat up straighter in my chair, body and mind suddenly alert. A neophyte spiritual director in the early 1990s, I had come to public lecture to hear Dr. Peck. This statement came in response to a question I no longer remember, but the words shimmered in me evoking the combination of surprise "Oh" and naturalness "Of course" that I have come to associate with invitations of the Spirit.

I wrote the words at the top of my notes, sensing that whatever had moved could easily slip below the surface of my awareness. Something vital resided in them for my own wholeness and for my capacity as a director tending the movements of Spirit in others. Several years before I had experienced - and said a reflexive "No!" to - the disturbing approach of a God who wanted an intimacy that scared me. I still grieve that "No" and my inability to welcome what I most deeply wanted. At the same time, I was becoming aware of how much life I experienced in conversations with directees - and of a palpable intimacy growing in our times as we touched the depths of sacred story together.

I had noticed too that, while my practice as a director in a local congregation was burgeoning and conversation was broad as well as deep, nobody talked about matters of sexuality. Well, not explicitly. Many of my directees made references to abuse histories or struggles with relationships that they were typically working through in therapy, but "sex" as an identifiable topic stayed outside the direction room, I wondered why and whether it mattered.

Mostly I experienced awe in listening to the lives of directees - a felt sense of taking off my shoes and standing with them on holy ground. Occasionally, however, other feelings intruded. When a male directee brought a dream about me into a session, I felt a mild excitement followed by guarded self-annoyance. When he later told his wife - and then me - that he felt like he was committing "spiritual adultery" by sharing his soul with me in direction, it provoked an altogether different response: I panicked internally wondering what I had done wrong.

Energies of relatedness, intimacy, desire, mutuality, generative life, and the urge toward wholeness, as well as places of incapacity, injury, and distortion with and among all parties in the direction relationship point to the sacred fire - Eros - at the core of the human person. Something like the laddered strands of the DNA double helix, sexuality and spirituality are intimately tied together. We cannot have one without the other.

Our programs for forming directors need to prepare candidates for their own awakening and growth toward psycho-sexual-spiritual integration as well as for recognizing and responding to the interpersonal energies that will be part of spiritual unfolding within the direction relationship. Beyond the interpersonal, many commentators note what appears to be a historical moment in human history that invites expanded consciousness. Because spiritual and sexual energies are so primal and interconnected, any large movements of human awakening will likely be accompanied by surging sexual impulses that need to be carefully discerned and integrated.

Powerful energies, especially in times of passage, need conscious tending. Ronald Rolheiser reminds us that "energy, especially sexual energy, is not always friendly and it often

seeks to take us across borders prematurely or irreverently.” Reverent, wakeful tending is a necessary antidote to both the contemporary naivete’ about the power and nature of erotic and creative energy as well as to a reflexive fear that seeks to repress the pulse of life itself. Three important aspects of preparation for director/guides are exposure to a theology of sexuality, an experience of reflecting on one’s own sacred sexual story, and the opportunity to engage in casework with peers that will give practical experience in approaching the energies that arise in the direction relationship. All of these modes assist in developing the capacity to hold “the most powerful of all fires, the best of all fires, the most dangerous of all fires, and the fire which ultimately lives at the base of everything, including the spiritual life.

Toward a Theology of Sexuality

Honoring what is life-giving while respecting what is dangerous about the sacred fire at the human core requires more than rules, Diarmuid O’Murchu notes that the spiritual landscape rather than religious tradition is the contemporary arena for theological exploration and opens up new horizons of possibility and ultimate meaning while providing a framework for right relationship.

The experience of mystics and saints across traditions and generations reveals that spiritual-sexual landscape in ways that are remarkably similar and which point toward the metaphor of the Divine Lover who draws the beloved ever closer. The Hebrew Scripture repeatedly portray the human-divine relationship in the love language of the joyful intimate “knowing” of covenanted spouses. In this vein, the Baal Shem Tov, Polish mystic and founder of the Hassidic movement, comments on Job 19:26, “Yet from my flesh I shall see God” (NAS): “Just as you cannot sire {a child} in physical copulation unless your organ is ‘alive’ and {you are filled with} desire and joy, so it is with spiritual coupling, that is, with regards to the words of Torah and prayer: when it is done with a live organ, in joy and pleasure, then you can be fecund.”

The goodness of the bodied life and capacity to enjoy the sensory pleasure that are God’s good gift to humanity are similarly reflected in the Talmudic declaration “You will be held accountable {in the Word to Come} for every legitimate pleasure you denied yourself!” So, too, Christian and Muslim mystics who enter the waters of transforming relationship with the Holy find themselves relying on metaphors of intense spiritual-sensual longing and love. Even Augustine, whose legendary struggles with sexuality have left a deep mark on Christian theology, used the lush language of the senses to express his relationship with God: “You called, you cried, you shattered my deafness. You sparkled, you blazed, you drove away my blindness. You shed your fragrance, and I drew in my breath and I pant for you. I tasted and now I hunger and thirst. You touched me, and now I burn with longing for your peace.”

In the same way that the spiritual expresses in sexual language, the sexual points to spirit. Philip Yancey, an evangelical Christian, names sex as “probably the loudest single rumor of another world that most people ever experience. It’s the closest thing to transcendence that people feel. It’s a powerful force that seems irresistible. There’s nothing that pulls a person out of himself or herself more than sexual attraction to another being. What concerns me is that most people think of sex and God as polar opposites. If it’s the most powerful force that most people experience, then to me it’s a pointer.”

I would add that the experience of sexual attraction as well as its consummation in the faithful sharing of intimate life also points toward generative participation within the other “bodies” of communal and cultural life. Spirituality is not only about inferiority, but also about relatedness. One of the Spirit’s primary invitations in this time is, I believe, movement toward

living the undivided life. Individually that might include healing the split between body and spirit or corporately moving toward participative integration of the personal and social life.

The urge to live a life of growing integrity extends also to a deeper moral agency seeking to arise so that moral behaviors are not just put on from the outside, but flow from the interior heart of the person and society enabling self-donating love to flow outward. There are many apparent dualism warring in our time that are actually polarities seeking a new way of being in relationship - a communion perhaps - that honors the rightful place of each without being held captive by either.

To be sexed is to be in the state of separation that precedes communion, and to be irresistibly attracted to the other. The Latin root of the word "sex" comes from *secare* meaning to be cut off, severed,, amputated, or disconnected from the whole. The sexing of humanity in the archetypal separation of Eve from Adam points to the long journey into awakening as separate selves with the potential to freely choose reconnection in love. Leaving behind an unconscious and primal union with God and within humanity (first experienced in our mother's womb) opens the possibility of authentic mutuality and intimacy in communion. To be sexed is to be separate and to be alive with restless energies that drive toward reconnection.

These restless energies are embedded in the erotic nature of creation itself from the atoms that unite to form elements, to the pulsing energies in the halls of high school, to the poetry of the mystics. The Sufi poet Hafiz attributed our separation from the "warm body" of God as a source of our constant yearning. Cosmologist Brian Swimme refers to the power of attraction that saturates the universe as "cosmic allurement." In human experience we call this relational power love, and sexual energy at its best is the embodied expression of that love. We are made to move out toward the other. The only issue is how - in honor of self and other or as objects of gratification: "Sexuality is a beautiful, good, extremely powerful sacred energy, given us by God and experienced in every cell of our being as an irrepressible urge to overcome our incompleteness, to move toward unity and consummation with that which is beyond us. It is also the pulse to celebrate, to give and receive delight, to find our way back to the Garden of Eden where we can be naked, shameless, and without worry and work as we make love in the moonlight. Ultimately though, all these hungers, in their full maturity, culminate in one thing: They want to make us co-creators with God. Sexuality is not simply about finding a love or even finding a friend. It is about overcoming separateness by giving life and blessing it. Thus in its maturity, sexuality is about giving oneself over to community, friendship, family, service, creativity, humor, delight, and martyrdom, so that, with God, we can help bring life into the world."

Awakening to the Sacred Sexual Self

Movement from theology to personal story is crucial grounding for the director-to-be. Healthy sexuality and spirituality are embodied; they incarnate in human experience. Edwin McMahon and Peter Campbell comment that "after years of experience as therapists, we have found that the single most damaging Christian influence impeding psycho-sexual development is the inherited piety of 'personal relationship to Jesus.' Too often such piety simply provides an easily available religious escape hatch for avoiding the risks and responsibilities of sexual integration. Instead of growing through the pain and fear of intimate human encounter, a relationship with a sexually safe disembodied Jesus can be substituted."

My formation program colleagues and I intentionally weave multiple experiences of body prayer and movement into all our processes to assist in waking up and grounding "in the flesh." This is also true of multiple passes at the theme of sacred story. As directors, we will be able to

tend the sacred fire in others to the degree we are open to exploring it in ourselves. This includes becoming aware of the sexual dimensions of our own sacred history as well as assumptions, attitudes and values about both sex and sexuality. A powerful toll for wading into these waters in the formation program is to have the directors-to-be write a graced history that focuses on their psychosexual unfolding.

Psychosexual development, according to Fran Ferder and John Heagle, is another term for “growing up” in our relational lives, and they view it as a pathway to love, not just a behavioral process. Growth toward psychosexual integration reveals four qualities that underlie human and sexual development: (1) emerging self-awareness, (2) responsible freedom, (3) developing creativity, and (4) deepening capacity for intimacy. Our psycho-sexual story reveals “all the moments of growth, excitement, discovery, pain, struggle, and questioning in our relational lives. This is the story of our growing up - our journey toward friendship and human communion. It is the story of our physical and emotional awakenings, our yearnings and our fantasies, our soaring feelings and our broken hearts, our desires and our dependencies, our struggles with shame and our breakthroughs to mutuality.”

Ferder and Heagle use a four-part process for initiating the exploration of sacred sexual story. The only guidelines are to listen to our own story with openness, honesty, and reverence. First, they use the journaling device called “Stepping Stones” developed by Ira Progoff, to outline major turning points or transition experiences. Specifically, they ask, “What are 7 or 8 key stepping stones in your psychosexual story and what do they reveal about your search for love and intimacy?” Second, “What were the core life messages about sexuality - verbal or nonverbal - in your family?” Third, “Who are the persons who have helped you come to a more affirming understanding of sexuality and intimacy?” Fourth, “What would you like to reimage or reinterpret in your attitudes and inherited messages toward sexuality?” The journaler is asked to jot down reflections and to bring them to prayer and to someone they trust, a wonderful foundation and opening for a fledgling director.

Supporting the Practice

A statement of guidelines to use when listening to the sexual stories of our directees, along with case examples that can be discussed with peers and in reflection papers for the mentor, is very helpful. It gives program staff multiple views of the development of the intern and opens the field for the interns to explore possible responses to “live” situations.

Many of these guidelines were first presented by Janet Ruffing, RSM, and Don Bisson, FRMs, for the Spiritual Directors International Symposium, *Expanding Our Horizons Toward a Renewed Sexuality*, in 1998. The single case outlined here is intended to give a taste of the kind of material that might be helpful. The reflection questions at the end of this piece can be used as a further tool to help interns and staff explore the topic.

Some Guidelines and Reminders

1. Hold a Board Frame

Sexuality is never just about sex, and spirituality is never just about spirit. Both are often coded material about emergent issues of personhood. Our sexuality is about much more than our genitals and what we do or don't do with them; it's also about our bodies and senses, self-perceptions, relationships, creativity, the ways we connect and are generative in the world. Remembering the broad frame helps a director to receive material and explore it as we do any other material for the presence of God.

Here is a case example to be followed by group reflection with the four questions at the end of this section: A directee, a single woman in her late forties in ministry in the church, has

been deepening in her relationship with God. One day she comes to direction and after a significant pause says, “There’s something I need to tell you. It’s really embarrassing and I’ve never told anyone this before. I’m afraid of what you’ll think of me.” There’s another long pause.”We’ve talked before about how hard it is for me to have any sort of a social life in the church. Well, there’s a way I’ve kind of created one for myself. Late at night when I’m all alone, I go into the online chat rooms where I can pretend to be anyone I want to be. I know it sounds stupid, but it’s kind of exciting. Lately the conversations are getting more and more suggestive sexually so I know I need to stop it, but part of me enjoys it. Don’t get me wrong, I have no desire to actually meet these people, but it lets me pretend for a little while that there’s more to my life than just work.”

2. Desire is Primary

Desire is primary to both spirituality and sexuality and to the formation of the human person. Part of the director’s role is to encourage the voicing and exploration of the directee’s longing for intimacy, which includes naming these desires to God. Intimacy is not necessarily about genitality, but about being a revealed self before a revealed other. Exploring what the directee wants and the willingness to embrace the changes or implications that would result in a door to the deeper realms. Questions that point toward the possibility of mutuality - “Is there any sense of God’s desire for you?” may also be fruitful.

3. Awakening of the Body and Senses

An awakening of the body and senses will occur as the person deepens in relationship with God. This can be alarming to the directee and to the director unless it is held in the boarder frame of spiritual awakening. The surging energies of bodily awakening can flood the sexual centers of body and mind so powerfully that it seems the opposite of spiritual experience. It is, however, a deeply spiritual movement of incarnation which is gradually integrated into the whole person. Part of our task as directors is to help the directee experience the awakening arousal and bring it with consciousness to the primary relationship with God. The director may also assist in making a distinction between having an experience and moving into action in the world.

4. The Stance of Active Love and Compassion

Hold the stance of love and compassion with and for the directee. We must consciously resist being the moral enforcers of tradition. Joining directees in their struggles and ambiguities requires nothing less than enduring the tension of God-at-work. Becoming comfortable with “mistake making” and learning as part of the human process is necessary, as is the understanding that the director is not responsible for the choices a directee makes. This is not about being morally neutral; rather, it is about going morally deeper by enabling an authentic moral agency to arise internally in a conversion of heart. What initially presents as moral laxity or seeming infidelity may ultimately be an opening to new depth as the person seeks to become a “true I before a true thou.”

5. Supervision

Supervision is crucial for holding the energies and for growth in freedom as we sit with directees in whatever sexual/spiritual experience they bring. God meets directees where they are, not where we are. The director needs to remain conscious and reflective about feelings and judgments related to the directee’s relational choices so that they don’t interfere with the directee’s freedom. If we’re tempted to close what is uncomfortable with the “right” answer or to become the teacher, that’s a signal that we’re seeking our own comfort rather than listening in service of the directee.

6. Heat, Passion, and Transformation

Heat and passion are necessary for transformation, and they can be dangerous. Spirituality flourishes in true vulnerability in which old self and God images come apart and open to the More of Spirit. When entering the depths with another, directors and directees alike experience intimacy and vulnerabilities. Add to this the presence of explicitly sexual content, and both intimacy and vulnerability soar. So do the potential gifts and possibility of real transformation. Rolheiser reminds us that sex “is not just like anything else, despite our culture’s protest. Its fire is so powerful, so precious, so close to the heart and soul of a person, and so godly, that it either gives life or it takes it away. It can never be casual, but is either a sacrament or a destructive act.” As directors, we need to be both welcoming and wise in tending this sacred energy.

Walking this way with directors in formation is sacred travel in which we affirm by our attention and intention that sexuality is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be welcomed and lived. Hildegard of Bingen celebrates what she calls *verditas* or the lush, greening power of God in our lives and world. In the face of God’s flowing lushness, she believed that the only true sin is to dry up. May our students awaken to the vital importance of staying both juicy and on fire in their own lives and in their capacity to welcome the fully alive human person that Irenaeus of Lyons calls “the glory of God.”

For Further Reflection

1. What do you notice in yourself as you read the situation described in the case study included here? What inner “movements” do you experience toward and away from him/her; toward and away from his/her experience?
2. How might you as director respond?
3. What attitudes, values and personal experiences might affect your response?
4. How free would you be to work with him/her as a spiritual director?