

Cybersex: Facing Reality and Discerning the Spirit

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I would like to emphasize several key aspects of the subject under consideration: the impact of the Internet on sexual attitudes and behaviors in our society. The first is to call attention to the word "facing." We are here to walk into the problem, not around it. Secondly, while there are many healthy and obviously positive uses of the Internet, the excessive use of the Internet in sexual pursuits interferes with and threatens to arrest the normal developmental process in human beings. This process, when it unfolds constructively, leads individuals to higher levels of maturity and integration. In these comments I will refer to social constructionism as a contributing factor in blocking development. Thirdly, as we consider what discerning the spirit might mean in our day and age I will call attention to the responsibility of religious systems and organizations to face our current reality.

The first step in creating awareness is facing into the reality. The reason that we are in this Abbey today is that the Order of Saint Benedict some years ago made the very clear and most significant decision to face into the painful and disturbing reality of sexual abuse and trauma in its own community. Having faced into that reality the decision was then made to do something constructive and creative about it. As I thought about the way the Order responded under these circumstances and as I noted that some other religious systems had responded quite differently under similar circumstances I wondered how the Order got to be how it is. What is really going on here?

Then I discovered that what was really going on here was Saint Benedict himself. What I mean to say is that Benedict became the historic and salvific figure that he is because this is exactly what he did: he may have thought briefly about walking around, but in the end he walked into the problem. He made a powerful impact on society in his time and in the centuries to come. So let's for a moment reflect on how Saint Benedict went about facing his reality and discerning the Spirit in the light of what he saw in his world. His discernment was passed on to future generations of Benedictines to the very great benefit of the world we live in. The parallel between what Benedict did fourteen centuries ago and what we need to do today under vastly different circumstances seems quite remarkable.

In the 6th century when Benedict wrote his rule governing the life and organization of the Benedictine monastic system he began with these words: "Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.... First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to Him (the true King, Christ the Lord) most earnestly to bring it to perfection.... Let us get up then, at long last, for the scriptures rouse us when they say: 'It is high time for us to arise from sleep (Romans 13:11).' Let us open our eyes to the light

that comes from God, and our ears to the voice from heaven that every day calls out this charge: 'If you hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts (Ps 95:8)' And again: 'You that have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit says to the Churches (Rev 2:7)' And what does he say? 'Come and listen to me sons; I will teach you the fear of the Lord (Ps 34:12).' 'Run while you have the light of life, that the darkness of death may not overtake you (John 12:35)'."

When Benedict quoted the Gospel of John saying "Run while you have the light of life, that the darkness of death may not overtake you," he may have been referring to and speaking of the terrible crisis that Rome was experiencing. The barbarians had sacked the city in 410 and again in 455. The emperor was deposed in 476. By the early part of the following century there was constant war as various barbarian tribes invaded the Italian peninsula. Benedict was born into this chaos in the year 480. It is reported that, as a young man, he came to Rome to go to school and was so disgusted with the paganism he saw there that in a fit of radical idealism and extreme revulsion of a world gone awry he renounced the world and retreated to live in solitude in a cave at Subiaco, some thirty miles east of Rome. Fortunately he did not remain there and in time went on to found the greatest monastic system the world has ever known.

But not only did he found a stunning monastic system; most remarkably he plunged into the very world that, as a younger man, had so completely turned him off. He succeeded in bringing together his high idealism with the practical realities of a world that somehow or other had to rebuild itself along new lines. He faced reality. He discerned the Spirit and integrated a living faith with the mundane reality of daily work. Bringing together worldly reality and the Spirit speaks to the cosmic goal we strive for today: to integrate successfully human ideas and action.

Some years ago Arnold Toynbee wrote the lead essay in a book entitled *Man at Work in God's World*. His thesis is that when Benedict came out of his cave and plunged into the world he changed the world. This is how Toynbee puts it: "Through Saint Benedict's Rule, agrarian life was restored to health first in Italy and then in the rest of the derelict domain of the Roman Empire in Western Europe.... It is no exaggeration to say that the whole of the extraordinary economic development of our modern Western society.... can be traced back to Saint Benedict's initiative." Benedict had tried running away from reality and hiding out by himself in a cave, and it may be that on some days we may be tempted to try to do the same thing.

One theory that has been suggested that might encourage such a mind-set is the idea that as our technological skills advance and things get more and more efficient mechanically and electronically, as technology ascends and advances, moral sensitivities, values and ethical criteria decline. In time they tend to disintegrate. If there is anything to this theory we might well ask: Where will it end? Where will our moral, ethical and spiritual standards be a century from now? What values will women, men and children apply and live in the year of 3001? These questions are enough to force us to face our current reality very vigorously and to do the very best we can to discern the Spirit of love, creativity, wisdom and knowledge that may guide us into a more sensible way of living and surviving in a world that is electronically smart and spiritually handicapped.

Our current material, mechanistic, electronic reality seems to be in unavoidable conflict with our non-material, spiritual and moral principles. Our goal is not to run away and hide in cave, but to struggle with this tension and picture how to bring them into a meaningful relationship through a process of integration. We must avoid keeping them in separate compartments. Scott Peck argues that the movement toward integration is, in his words, "both graceful and saving." In speaking about the need for an integrated, holistic world, he refers to what he describes as "that remarkable capacity which human beings have to take things which are properly related to one another and stick them in separate airtight compartments in our mind so that they do not rub up against one another and cause any pain." But trying to attain such integration is anything but easy! For instance, he asks, how do we handle the fact that on the coinage of our country we continue to write the words: "In God we trust" and at the same time we are the world's leading manufacturer and supplier of destructive weapons and the most efficient war machines that humankind has ever known, and we are getting better at it all the time. Will we ever be able to strike a balance between our national motto and our national war-like attitude and mind-set? (Peck 1993). This same dilemma is faced with regard to the Internet that if we run away and try to hide in a cave rather than address the contradictions, tensions, frustrations and fears created by our current reality, then, clearly, this reality will overpower the Spirit. Somehow, we have to pay attention to the ancient words of the psalmist: "For the word of the Lord is faithful and all his works to be trusted" (Ps 33). The person who wrote these words over 2000 years ago had no idea how complicated and complicating the works of the Lord could become. In what sense and to what extent do we trust the Internet as a work of the Lord? Or, perhaps the question is – to what extent do we trust the human nature that uses the Internet? At this point are we sure that the Internet's potential for good is greater than its potential for evil?

John writes in his first letter: "What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of Life..." (I John 1:1-2). When you watch your screen and touch your keyboard and hear your speaker do you have some sense that maybe this whole experience does in some way concern "the Word of Life"?

Facing reality and discerning the Spirit are very different experiences and that precisely is the problem. Facing reality means seeing it for all that it is in its many facets – its mix of influences, information, functions and purposes. Discerning the Spirit requires getting below the surface and identifying a deeper level of experience.

In particular, we are being asked in this conference to focus our attention on the numbing consequences of the sexual traumatization that is evident in our society. What are the causes and sources of this traumatization? Who are the agents and the agencies? How do we understand what is really happening?

This morning I would like to examine this issue of sexual traumatization in our society against the background of developmental theory. There are many versions of development theories, but in general the concept is that the human experience of the life cycle is a developmental

process in which the person moves through stages of increasingly conscious awareness, insight, understanding and moral perceptions that in turn govern attitudes and behaviors. My thesis is that the process of development, from a religious point of view, is personal, social and spiritual. Ideally, it guides one to the understanding of self as interdependent, altruistic, and capable of relating to the whole of creation in a meaningful way and to the gaining of a redemptive and sustaining relationship with God the Creator.

I will examine certain developmental theorists who seem to have much in common and are not dissonant with the theological position that I hold. Having looked at the various ways the highest developmental goals are stated, I will then turn to the Internet and sexuality. I will conclude that at least some of the sexual traumatization in our society derives from the fact that the power of the Internet threatens human development so that the ultimate and desired goals are not achieved. Development is arrested as human developmental progress is blocked, thus causing some people to be pegged forever at the lower levels of development. They then suffer the consequences of moral, spiritual and social stagnation and the loss of authentic intimacy. They may be condemned to a lifetime of short-term gratification and long-term pain.

The three theorists I will mention are Lawrence Kohlberg, Eric Erikson and Ken Wilber.

Erikson presented his life cycle stages in terms of a negative descriptor of a particular stage and what is needed at that stage to compensate for it or to correct it. In the first four stages he suggests that humans have to deal with mistrust, shame, doubt, guilt and a sense of inferiority. These conditions are overcome by learning to trust, beginning to gain autonomy, being able to take initiative and experiencing success through some form of fruitful industry. The process of growth and development then continues as the person gains her or his identity, that in turn fosters intimacy, which overcomes isolation leading to generativity, and resulting finally in personal integrity which overcomes despair.

Kohlberg's stages of moral development follow a somewhat similar pattern of moving from an initial level that he designates as the egocentric viewpoint in which that which is right for the person is what physically satisfies the self. Growth then is moving beyond self-satisfaction to a willingness to follow rules – and especially the Golden Rule that takes into consideration the rights and the needs of others. The person then gains a social perspective and the self is integrated with a personal conscience that through following stages evolves into an objective set of moral principles that are universal. Kohlberg groups his stages of moral development into three categories that he designates as "Pre-conventional," "Conventional," and "Post Conventional."

Of all the developmental theorists Ken Wilber is, I think, the most comprehensive and the most recent. At this point I can only claim having been introduced to him through his big work that was published last year under the title – as mentioned earlier – Sex, Ecology and Spirituality with the subtitle: The Spirit of Evolution. What I understand of Wilber from my introduction to him is a wonderfully holistic and unified view of life in this universe. I gather that he has become somewhat controversial as he pushes thought and analysis of the human

experience into some very new territories. His big fight seems to be with the widespread endorsement of pluralistic relativism as the newest and highest level of development about which he has this to say: "But pluralistic relativism is not itself the highest wave of development, as numerous studies have consistently shown (see 'Integral Psychology' – previous publication). When vision-logic matures into its middle and late phases, pluralistic relativism increasingly gives way to more holistic modes of awareness, which begin to weave the pluralistic voices together into beautiful tapestries of integral intent. Pluralistic relativism gives way to Universal Integralism. Where pluralism frees the many different voices and multiple contexts, universal integralism begins to bring them together into a harmonized chorus. Universal integralism thus stands on the brink of even higher developments...."

This is a profound and complex statement. I sense that he saying that there is something out there in terms of universal integralism that at this point – handicapped as we are by previous and generally accepted modalities and especially by our capacity to compartmentalize new knowledge and new experience – is exceedingly difficult to envision. But before leaping into that exalted and ethereal realm so far above our preoccupation with the mechanics and fascination with our rapidly advancing technology – let us hear Wilber's comments on developmental theory and particularly his comments on Kohlberg's theory of moral development: "...in the sphere of moral development, not every- body agrees with the details of Lawrence Kohlberg's seven moral stages, nor with the details of Carol Gilligan's reworking of Kohlberg's scheme. But there is general and ample agreement that human moral development goes through at least three broad stages: the human at birth is not yet socialized into any sort of moral system (it is Preconventional); the human then learns, from itself and from others, a general moral scheme that represents the basic values of the society it is raised in (it becomes Conventional); and with even further growth, the individual may come to reflect on society and thus gain some modest distance from it and gain a capacity to criticize or reform it (the individual is to some degree Postconventional).

Thus, although the actual details and the precise meaning of that developmental sequence are still hotly debated, everybody pretty much agrees that something like those three broad stages do indeed occur, and occur universally. These are orienting generalizations: they show us, with a great deal of agreement, where the important forests are located, even if we can't agree on how many trees they contain" (Wilber 2000).

Now, if we accept Wilber's affirmation of Kohlberg's stages of moral development and then look at how this pattern of growth and evolution is influenced by the increasing popularity and utilization of the Internet we might conclude that the Internet and the web have at least the potential for having a powerfully negative impact on stage number two which is designated as "Conventional." This is the stage when humans are expected to increase their capacity for socialization by interacting with other human beings. However, with the extensive impact of the Web and with computer-mediated relating replacing face-to-face relating, and with other major influencing factors at work in our society, the normal developmental process may be deterred rather than advanced.

Dr Al Cooper, Clinical Director of the San Jose Marital and Sexuality Center, reports that in 1998 the San Francisco Chronicle reported that the use of the Internet is doubling every hundred days. In that same year Alta Vista listed over seven million web pages containing the word "sex." Putting these two facts together suggests that an increasing number of people are participating in computer-mediated relating thus reducing, in all likelihood, their opportunities for face-to-face relating. This in turn would seem to invite patterns of isolation and withdrawal from socializing experiences. What will the impact then be on the process of moral development and values formation? We can, perhaps, reasonably hypothesize that the impact will be negative.

However, that is still not the worst of the bad news. The experience in stage two will seriously affect stage three. In this stage Wilber suggests that, ideally, as the growth initiated in stage two continues, "...the individual may come to reflect on society and thus gain some modest distance from it and gain a capacity to criticize and reform it." This is the postconventional stage when really good things are supposed to happen. This is the stage that in our religious vocabulary we call discernment, and discernment can lead to renewal and reform. Discernment is the process of accurately observing what is going on around us and within us, analyzing the various factors and options, and then engaging the Spirit to help us make choices and decisions.

Obviously the world can be better when humans have this capacity to observe, discern, criticize and reform. When that capacity is diminished then the ability to criticize and reform and make clarifying judgments is replaced by uncritical acceptance of the dominant and prevailing socio-economic and political realities. At that point the powerful dynamic of social constructionism takes over. Social constructionism runs something like this: most of the world buys into the idea that power, control, pleasure and popularity, physical accomplishment and material gain and prosperity are the things that enjoy the widest respect in our society. The media in thousands of ways encourages people to believe that these are the appropriate goals for our striving, thus fostering commitment and devotion to this version of reality. It presents a shallow, fleeting concept of pleasure; but this hunger for pleasure and promise presented with glitz and unrelenting repetition in a highly manipulative manner triggers that part of the brain which controls highly oriented sensate responses providing quick arousal and a hunger for instant gratification, planting the seminal idea that if I can only get this thing or this experience or this diversion, I will surely be OK.

The theory of social constructionism states that individuals will construct their own reality out of the current state of reality that is most strongly endorsed by the society in which they live. Competing voices for claims on reality may exist in some quiet manner attempting to be heard, but the methods and devices for presenting the socially endorsed reality are so powerful that in the current state they simply overwhelm the alternate values. Baseball players earn millions of dollars, and their contracts and salaries are continually escalating. Meanwhile, schools are poorly equipped and teachers are underpaid. Politically, so-called education reform has become a popular issue, but while this struggle goes on in the political arena little reference is ever made to the obscene earning powers of the non-productive celebrity figures whose job is to amuse, entertain and distract. Few voices in our culture are raised in protest. The current

social reality has taken over and is now uncritically accepted. Reality is constructed out of the current standards no matter how inadequate or unfair this may be.

So where does all this leave us? Social constructionism takes over and human development toward maturity, integrity and meaning threatens to be arrested for millions of individuals in our global village. On-going tension develops between what is understood to be good, healthy, life-giving, restorative and developmentally positive; and on the other hand, the powerful technical and media facilities which foster pleasures at the purely sensate level, encourage dependencies on material wealth, and in a myriad of ways imperil the spirits and souls of women, men and children. This tension is not new. It is as old as the Garden of Eden, but the stakes in trying to address it constructively keep getting higher and higher with each new generation. What do we do?

As we keep our attention focused on the sexual traumatization of our society with the Internet as a significant causal factor, we attend to the findings of those who have studied the matter. Dr Al Cooper, who was quoted earlier, has reported on his research, and while some feel that his research methods were less than perfect, he is a voice to be heard. He has made this prophetic statement: "In the next twenty years the information age (i.e. computers and the Internet) is going to lead to more dramatic changes in people's lives than in any comparable period in history." He also throws in this observation that scopophilia – that is, viewing sexual stimuli – is the number one sexual activity in the United States. This helps to explain the proliferation of the twenty-four hour triple X-rated adult so-called bookstores and the abundance of nude bars and lounges throughout our communities.

In classifying online users he has come up with a kind of triage of persons who engage in online sexual pursuits. On the one hand there are the recreational users who might spend an hour or so a week on line but for whom the Internet will probably never be a problem. At the opposite end of the continuum are the at-risk users. Of this group Cooper states: "We have strong concerns that there may be a significant number of people who might never have had major problems with their sexuality before the Internet, but are now at risk for developing some degree of difficulties with their sexual activities as a result of the Triple A engine": that is, problems emerging because sex on the Internet is easily and constantly available, much of it is affordable, and there is the perception that it is anonymous and therefore protected and safe. Cooper estimates that this group may be as high as 17% of the online population.

In between these two extremes is the third group whom he names Cybersex Compulsives. He states: " These people both use their computers in excess of eleven hours a week for sex, and show significant behavioral characteristics of sexually compulsive behavior. This group could represent hundreds of thousands of people" (Cooper 2000).

While there is extensive data related to the damaging aspects of the Internet and sexuality, there is at the same time important benefits and advantages offered. These positive contributions are extensive, but to mention a few we note that the Internet can provide effective and healthy sexuality education. It can offer classes for parents on talking with teens

about safe sex. It is the means of distributing valuable information regarding medications for medically related sexual problems. The world's biggest dating service is provided on the Internet with success in creating relationships leading to a number of happy marriages. The Internet can be helpful to couples in finding new ways to increase their intimacy. That which has the potential for pain and damage can also foster development toward maturity, altruism and differentiation of self.

Now, let us go back to Benedict who, in the early paragraphs of his Rule, quoted from the Book of the Revelation of John (Rev 2:7): "You that have ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit says to the Churches." So what is the Spirit saying to the Churches in this day and age? And especially what is the Spirit saying about a Living Faith in a sexually traumatized culture? How can Churches and Synagogues make things better? Over the centuries organized religions have often tended to focus judgmentally and condemn sexual sins, The Scarlet Letter being one of the clearest examples. It seems to me that the Spirit is now telling us to change that tradition. The time has come to explore and define a positive, rewarding and life-enhancing relationship between sexuality and spirituality. The way for doing this is not crystal clear, but the need is very clear. However, this cannot be done unless the Churches are willing to take on a major responsibility for increasing sexual understanding. Within religious circles condemnation, repression and avoidance must be replaced by openness and dialogue and by Church-sponsored sexuality education that helps women, men and children understand who they are as sexual beings. And what about the Internet? Do Churches ever mention it? Part of what is needed is information about where and how the Internet can be helpful in providing resources for spiritual development and sexual health. And another needed part is raising consciousness and awareness to the pitfalls, dangers and damage that can be brought about by the seduction of the Triple A machine and how the internet can "turbocharge" sexuality because of its accessibility, its affordability and its perceived anonymity.

I conclude by challenging each of you to return to raise the question: What is the Spirit saying to the Churches whose Living Faith – if, indeed, that is what it is - is being called upon to confront the sexual traumatization of the culture we are now living in?

DR