

Desire: Gift of the Spirit

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I will be working today from the methods of the humanities, historical research and literary analysis, not from scientific method. My training and commitment are to the perspective of theology, put briefly that means affirming the centrality of mystery in human life. The problem at the end of last century was losing the sense of mystery. The achievement of the scientific revolution is an invitation to a further appropriation of the mystical in every aspect of life. The God of Christian theological reflection is one who is imaged in human being and relationship.

This talk, however, is not the product of me sitting alone thinking. I firmly believe that to think alone is as dangerous as to drink alone. Therefore, I have made it the subject of the most fascinating discussions with students, relatives, the masonry guys doing my new steps, and even two girls on an airplane.

I quote from Sebastian Moore. "Desire is love trying to happen. It is the love that permeates all the universe, trying to happen in me. It draws into its fulfilling meaning all the appetites of our physical being. It turns the need for shelter into the sacrament that is a house. And it turns the need for food and drink into a gourmet feast. It turns sexual passion into...ah, there we have a problem" (Moore 93).

We find in our history a systematic distrust and suppression of desire. There is an erotic incoherence deeply embedded in the culture. Mark Twain: "A lie can travel half way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes." The truth about desire is all tangled up in its shoelaces!

Ecclesial traditions until the last fifty years have done little more than reflect on this incoherence, even capitalize on it, as if to say "You are right to be confused, repressive, fearful" of desire (Moore 94). Today, our culture that appears to be anything but repressive is nonetheless so.

The Churches' attitudes toward sexuality do not counter the fear, and above all, the hopelessness in the culture. They mirror it. But ISTI exists to say it is not enough to be a mirror; we need to be a lighthouse! For historical reasons, sexual renunciation rather than sexual experience became the way of spiritual growth. I wrote my first book about rethinking sexuality in 1984 in order to see what I could say about how sexual and bodily passion is taken up into

authentic desire. It was a process of recovery, and to structure it I used the parable of the lost coin.

The situation is no better in the secular world of getting and spending. For the new internet-stock rich, the transition from middle class to rich has produced what Jacob Needleman, a philosophy professor at San Francisco State U, calls "the despair of people who have gotten what they want." (Perhaps it was First Officer Spock who most nearly got it right when he mused, "Having, it appears, is not so satisfactory a thing as wanting"; and then added, with a sardonic arch of those famous eyebrows, "It is not logical, but it is human" (Money Magazine, May 2000).

An important premise for me is that desire, yearning, longing, have been used for centuries as central metaphors for our search for God, and for God's reaching out toward humanity. That is so in spite of the fact that not many people were brought up to think of desire as a possible key to the spiritual journey but seen rather as part of uncontrollable bodily urges or indicator of personal willfulness. The pre-Christian classical era presented the ideal human being as free from need and desire, especially our apparently inescapable dependencies on food and sex.

I will argue here that it is vitally important to recover a spirituality of desire, for only by attending to our desires are we able to encounter our deepest self--the image of God within us. For Ignatius of Loyola desire is prayer; for Julian of Norwich, prayer is longing (Sheldrake 56). Desire relates us to prayer, God, choice and discernment, and of course our sexuality which is inextricably linked with spirituality (Sheldrake 7).

The task before us is not the failed one of the past--to subject sexual passion to the will. It is rather to restore sexuality to desire, whose origin and end is God. This revaluing of desire is part of the wider strategy of recovery and discovery going on here for the next few days!

How do we liberate our minds from the traps of Western culture? Superficial and trivial sex, voyeuristic sex, premature and immature sex, denial and secrecy. We live in a time when it may require more intimacy to discuss sex in its fullest dimensions than to actually have sex! Therefore on with the discussion.

I identify myself with the generation of feminists who entered the world of work in the late 1960s and early 70s convinced that if barriers to women's progress were simply dropped, all else would fall into place: an end to discrimination, we firmly believed, would yield a world of equal employment opportunity and open acceptance of feminine values including the goodness of the body and sexuality. It didn't take long to learn that we were wrong.

Desire has an important place in the feminist phantasie (Dorothee Soelle's word meaning the collective power of human being to "imagine" a present-future, and in so doing, to begin to create it among ourselves). In this phantasie we can see ourselves as subjects rather than objects, as pleasure partners; we recognize the power we have when we are in relation to one another; we know that the sharing of common goods, self-esteem, pleasure create more power

and pleasure for both. We acknowledge a connection between how we treat our bodies and how we conserve or damage our earth.

In reflecting on my own past I have seen many of the things that I wanted disappear in the reality of what I got. And I have seen what I never expected--and often never even wanted--become what was ultimately most important and most fulfilling in my life.

What Is Desire?

"Desires are best understood as our most honest experiences of ourselves in all our complexity and depth, as we relate to people and things around us" (Sheldrake 12).

Desire has been called "The Creator's ingenious way of calling us out of ourselves into relationship with one another" (Anthony Kosnik).

Desire is intimately associated with our capacity to love, hence has a particular association with erotic power, and a feeling of attraction toward or aversions from objects, people, and ideas. Any desire is essentially personal, that is to say, associated with the kind of persons we are. However, it can be directed toward nonpersonal things such as material possessions or abstract qualities such as success, justice and integrity (Sheldrake 12). The two young women I spoke with on the plane illustrate this. One's deepest desire is to be a mother and be pregnant; the other lives to make a contribution to society and is presently studying to be a pediatrician.

So, desire is for the actualizing of our relatedness. It is desire that draws us into who we really are, knowing and loving persons in relation.

Psychiatrist and spiritual mentor Gerald May: "Searching beneath anxiety, one will find fear. And beneath fear hurt will be discovered. Beneath the hurt will be guilt; beneath the guilt lie rage and hatred. But do not stop with this, for beneath the rage lies frustrated desire. Finally, beneath and beyond desire is love. In every feeling, look deeply. Explore without ceasing. At bottom, love is" (May 87).

Kierkegaard: There is aesthetic, moral, and spiritual/religious desire. Desires may be conscious or unconscious. Because they are spiritual, they are not easily discovered in oneself. They involve a positive and active reaching out to something or someone. Such a movement goes beyond our "temporary reactions to immediate circumstances" and actually touches upon deeper questions of our identity and our ideals (Sheldrake 12).

Someone posed the question last night as we sat chatting: Can you desire what is already present? I would say yes. Real desire desires its own increase, its own deepening. You may already have the physical presence of the beloved, or even lifelong loyalty and commitment, but you can still desire a deeper union, a greater awareness, or a larger life for you together.

There is nothing passive or limp about desire, for it gives energy and direction to our psyche (Sheldrake 14). I discovered this for myself in a fairly straightforward way when last September I traveled to Europe for the first time in twelve years and discovered how limited my life had become. The focused strength of desire has the capacity to enable a person to recognize limitation and to change behavior.

The 14th-century Italian mystic Catherine of Siena recognized the positive and extraordinary power of our desires when she wrote that our desire is one of the few ways of touching God: "You have nothing infinite except your soul's love and desire" (Dialogue 270). She said: God wants not your success but the greatness of your desire!

Human desire can be interpreted as a "permanent openness to what is other than ourselves and to what is beyond our boundaries" (Sheldrake 109). It has something to do with our living in a permanently liminal state. Desire for the infinite is inherently part of our human condition. And desire, particularly sexual desire, is evidence of our deep calling, our vocation.

Risk has been spoken of as the refusal to forget desire. Sebastian Moore reflects on Nelson Mandela's twenty-five unrecoverable youthful years spent behind bars, and says "Really he puts me to shame for risking so little"(Moore 92). Christ did not come so that we might have safety and have it in abundance. He came that we might have life and have it to the full! He did not say, blessed are those who do not think, but follow blindly. He did not say, blessed are those who do not feel, but act from reason alone. He said, Blessed are those who weep, who seek, who hunger and thirst...! He did not say give up your pleasurable relationships. He said give up your riches. There's a deaf spot in our psyche when little or less desire is considered more virtuous.

The problem is to keep desire from becoming absolutized. Then it becomes idolatry.

A healthy asceticism was actually an effective discipline to focus desire more sharply. Some spiritual writers mention a deepening of desire in association with the gradual loss of images of God. The ability to pin God down to this or that image drives us ultimately into a certain darkness or unknowing in which desire alone becomes the force that drives us onward. Our desires imply a condition of incompleteness because they speak to us of what we are not or what we do not have.

Sexual desire can be seen as a value that needs to be fostered. It is not primarily a primitive and undifferentiated force that has to be curbed. For desire as personal and person-oriented is not something instinctive. What we need to learn is not to deny our desires, to push them down, but on the contrary, to attend to them, to ask of them, What do I want, and hence begin to learn the difference between the compulsive, unfree, addictive movements that go by the name of desire and give desire a bad name, and the *élan vital* in us of which these movements are the deadening.

So it is that desire poses a paradox. In a proportion of the population, desire poses a significant problem, whether by its excess, its defect, its distortion, or its habitual superficiality. Nonetheless it is the energy, the chi of love. The irony of desire which can turn a life upside down, is that it is an expanding and transcending dynamic which draws us to higher and better objects.

When Is Desire Healthy?

Some see health as harmony between the higher and lower nature. But a loss of harmony may be considered both as a failure of the lower to obey the higher and as a failure of the higher to befriend the lower. But usually only the failure of the lower to obey is considered. But the key to the whole thing in theology is the desire of the higher to befriend the "lower" (Moore 97). The incarnation, after all, is God saying, let's get physical!

Those who remain aloof and detached are not saints "precisely because," says Gerald Vann, "there is something human lacking to them, their hearts are not fully alive, they have not yet fully realized in themselves God's human love of human being" (Gerald Vann 52).

One of my favorite quotes is Isaiah 5:20, quoted in John Irving's novel, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*. "Woe unto them that call evil good and good evil" (308). Just because some person's desires are acted out in a problematic way is no reason to be suspicious of all desire, or, as Owen Meany says profoundly, "Just because some preacher's an asshole, that's not proof that God doesn't exist" (310).

One of the purposes of desire is spiritual growth, that is, the understanding, acceptance, and transcendence of self in relationship! As one of my students wrote last semester, "Ultimately desire is about love. It is love-longing. I have this longing inside of me that pushes me to love deeply. This desire pushes me to improve myself and help to improve things for other people. Our desires are what keep us going from day to day. I am going in the direction of my desires and the power of my desires gives me my energy. When I am honoring my deep desires, that is when I feel the presence of God.

Desires are so powerful that if we can understand another person's desires, we can truly know and understand that person. Desire is what puts us on a spiritual path..." (Jean Hansen).

This young woman is a mystic according to the definitions of postmodern theologian Michel de Certeau: "He or she is a mystic who cannot stop wanting and, with the certainty of what is lacking, knows of every place and object that it is not that; one cannot stay there nor be content with that. Desire creates an excess. Places are exceeded, passed, lost behind it. It makes one go further, elsewhere. It lives nowhere" (229).

Discernment

Coming out of a tradition of suspicion of desire, it is helpful to know the process called discernment by which healthy desires are distinguished from unhealthy preoccupations. Discernment may be thought of as a journey, a process whereby we move from a multitude of desires, or from surface desires, to our deepest desire which contains all that is true and vital about ourselves.

When Is Desire Impaired?

Catherine Breiliet, French filmmaker, "Romance," says that the consequence of not having a sense of shame, and believing that nothing is sacred, is a world that looks like ours. Unhealthy desires have the quality of obsession and possessiveness. Unless love honors both lover and beloved, it turns into something grotesque and ultimately destructive. Lust by definition means getting sex wrong from trying to be God; it does not mean letting good sex rip! I used to say, think more, do less. Now I say: Tend your desires, which create the conditions for more good sex!

Sexual desire is often linked with self-oblivion or self-assertion, and as such, sexual desire becomes the "eroticization of domination." When relational dynamics are those of domination and acquiescence, this dualism reduces erotic experience to "your pain equals my pleasure." (See *Boys Don't Cry*). But the corrective is not downgrading sex. It is not the enemy in our quest for God! Rather, embarrassment at being sexual is inspired by pride and is the experience of the fallen condition. It would be a truer insight to say that sin consists in contempt for the flesh. It is the looking down on sexuality that is the immediate effect of claiming divinity as one's own. When desire becomes instinct absolutizing itself, it is idolatry.

The sexual crossing of boundaries in situations of unequal power has often been violent and abusive. At the heart of rape lies the desire to gain power over another human being and may be used to meet a number of needs that have little to do with real sexual desire, much less love. As was evident in the film *Boys Don't Cry*, rape has nothing to do with desire; it has everything to do with hatred and fear. It takes from individuals the God-given right to be the subject of their own desire, and to give their sacred being. Instead they are turned into object and their sacredness is profaned. I had a student who said that, as the world determined it, she had no value in this society, since she knew that she had not been a virgin since she was about eight years old. Of course the determination of her value did not take into consideration that her virginity was stolen from her in a way very similar to Tamar's in the Hebrew Scriptures book of 2 Samuel 13. Tamar renames it "the crime of Amnon."

There is so much more that should be told about Amnon's crime. What happened becomes known. Tamar wears the loss of her sacred, sexual, and spiritual self for the world to see but she is forced into silence. This silence protects the men who planned and committed this crime against her sacred being. Tamar was a fully alive, sacred, sexual and spiritual woman, who was fully prepared to give care to her sick brother. No fool this Tamar, she spoke up for herself when she recognized what he planned to do to her. He, however, disregarded her sacred being

completely when he carried out his plan, caring only about satisfying his most base urges. Both of their lives and the lives of many others were destroyed by this violation.

Had Amnon not believed that Tamar was his property, his possession, had he not profanely violated her to appease his own cravings, there would be no crime and no story. How different would be the world if loving were so sacred that it could only be given but not taken or owned?

The renaming of the rape of Tamar to be the "crime of Amnon" is significant. With the emphasis on the tragic effects to the woman, responsibility is shifted, and silence descends over the violator. Why is the so-called Lewinsky affair not referred to more often as "the Clinton folly"?

But this student believes that all things can be made new, even tattered and tarnished love maps. "One day," she writes, "my body, spirit and soul self will be healed, made new again, able to joyfully appreciate its wholeness. Owning that gift, I will be able to honor and accept who I am, honor and receive, then give the God-given gift of pleasure. I will be able to choose to commit to another but never again be owned by another."

Too much superficial sex is often the cause of loss of desire. The blasphemy of an abusive relationship, and any relationship is abusive if the partner has not yet discovered her own authentic desire, is that it offers a sign meant to promise connection, empties it of its power, and offers its contradiction--a stone, not bread; a scorpion, not a fish. This is why the human process of differentiation is a condition for graced union.

Two contrary views of asceticism present themselves here. The conventional view is that it means denying ourselves things we want. A more discerning and confounding view is that it means dropping things we no longer want, admitting to ourselves we no longer want them, and thus giving our journey, our story, a chance to move on.

Attending to desire is about cultivating in ourselves a capacity for passionate concern. Because it is such a strong thing there is always a hint of risk. We are probably aware that some desires may enslave us, others dissipate our energies. But desire can generate power and physical energy and may also galvanize our spirituality. To allow ourselves actively to desire is to be vulnerable. The fact that we frequently do not allow ourselves such risks and so often lack a lively spirituality has close connections with the frequent absence of a serious and healthy theology of the Holy Spirit in Western Christianity (Sheldrake 15).

There are two common reactions when you bring up the topic of desire: "I have so many desires that I don't know what to do with them." Such a feeling is partly related to our fears and sense that we lack control over our inner life. To distinguish between superficial and the deep desires, the healthy and the unhealthy is more difficult than to treat them all with equal suspicion and try to live without them.

The other reaction is: "I was taught not to have desires, but rather it was important to fulfill the desires of certain other important people in my life, parents, teachers, spouse, the Church." The implication was that any strong feelings were unreliable. Contrast Ignatius of Loyola, "ask God our lord for what I want and desire" at the beginning of every period of prayer.

Deep desires have the potential to give direction to our lives. We discern our identity and our mission, first, by being aware and accepting the full range of desires that we experience; and secondly, understanding the way in which our desires vary greatly in their quality, from superficial to deep. The direction and potential of our desires is not always immediately evident. To come to appreciate these things demands patient reflection.

Deep desire should not be confused with an intensity of need that might lead us to hasty responses. Sometimes it takes refusing accepting, refusing, and thinking again. Example: Joan of Arc. Her deepest desire to live--recanted, then recanted her recanting. She knew the deep-down cost of identifying her deepest desire.

Why Is Desire Important?

My premise is that desire promotes growth and holiness. Real human sensuality and relationship are related to holiness. The proliferation of trivial, superficial sex need not be cast as the enemy of holiness; it is the enemy of desire, which is the energy for change and transformation.

While some warn against unbridled passion, most adults in committed relationships know that the problem is that passion is too "bridled." It is bridled by stress and medication and low self-esteem and false guilt. The solution is to keep desire going, which means to keep it growing, which means deepening it. We remind ourselves again. Lust is not good sexual passion in excess or out of control of the will, but it is sexual passion acting as a cover story for the will to dominate, to be God (See Boys Don't Cry).

Self Image

Although desire is a dynamic movement toward what will fulfill us, it depends paradoxically on our having a healthy sense of our own worth. We can only truly desire God, for example, if we actually believe that we are capable of growth. The more self-aware I am, in the best sense, the more I feel the pull of this possibility. So desire for God is rooted in self-belief, which is why attention to our human desires is vital. Every one of us needs to learn the human language of desire and love. We are not born with it, only with a capacity for it, as we are not born knowing a language, but having a capacity for speech.

From childhood onward we all have to learn that to grow up involves moving from fulfilling the expectations and desires of others to a greater realization of our own desires and the appropriateness of choosing for ourselves.

Choosing

We grow into the fullness of being human in the process of choosing--which is why the where/how of our choosing is so vital. Because attention to desire may lead us to touch our "essential self," it enables us to discern which of our choices are most expressive of who we truly are. And in the same process, desire becomes a metaphor of transformation--of being gradually freed from all that encumbers us and stops our growing or moving onward. At the core of preoccupation with possessions and money, with status and power, "I am sure," says Don Cozzens in *The Face of Priesthood*, "is a desire for union, a longing for intimacy. Unmet intimacy needs lead away from spiritual growth, not toward it" (Cozzens 31).

If you want to know what you desire, don't make a list, but look at what you have chosen. Look for a pattern in your choices, since patterns become habits, which become our second nature. After all, we do not become what we know, but we do become what we love.

Desire is linked essentially to our inner life in the Spirit rather than to abstract norms and external guidance. As we learn what we desire and learn to communicate what pleases us, we come to live increasingly in relation to it rather than to compulsion on the one hand or moral guilt on the other. This is the process of becoming a sexually mature person, a free person, a differentiated person.

But please don't accuse me of retreating into an idealized view of human desire. The sexual expression of our enslavement or immaturity tends to be compulsive and destructive. It can also be insatiable, preventing us from ever feeling fulfilled. But crucial to understand is that conflicted sexuality and misplaced sexual behavior do not indict sexuality and desire; they are indicators of much broader problems of maturity, freedom, and spiritual health.

What about God the Holy Spirit?

The Holy Spirit is encountered in our desire for God and in God's desire for us.

Our desire for God: "In some Jewish mystical traditions sexual intercourse between spouses was encouraged on the Sabbath night. To make love out of the fullness, relaxation, and joy of Sabbath was the earthly counterpart of the holy union that occurred on the Sabbath evening between the shekinah (the indwelling presence of God, sometimes seen as the feminine aspect) and the masculine aspect of God" (Moore 83).

All our deepest desiring conceals a desire for God. Jung saw alcoholism as a search for wholeness, a quest for union with God. The whole of our life, every kind of desire is touched by the Spirit of God in some sense. We have to stop looking for God as one object of our desires alongside and in competition with other desires. God the Holy Spirit is more like the immanent subject, the dynamic depths of all our desiring. The contemporary Welsh priest-poet R S Thomas puts it into perspective:

Why no! I never thought other than

That God is that great absence

In our lives, the empty silence

Within, the place where we go

Seeking, not in hope to

Arrive or find

(Thomas 1984, "Via Negativa")

The deep desire of the human being (an existential aptitude according to Karl Rahner) calls us into partnership with the absolute, and reveals the partnership of lovers as a sharing in this partnership with God. The Holy Spirit is the healing of the dichotomy between knowing and loving from which our world is suffering. Karl Rahner, who, like Thomas Merton, fell deeply in love, has written a credo appropriate for Pentecost: I believe in the Holy Spirit, who can heal my depression, overcome my prejudice, supply for my sense of inferiority, overcome my loneliness.

All this means is that we can have an experiential knowledge of our orientation toward the infinite. Julian of Norwich: "The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything." Mechtild of Magdeburg: "The day of my spiritual awakening was the day I saw--and knew I saw all things in God and God in all things." It describes, I believe, the possible future of every human being. It is not surprising that the Holy Spirit, the instigator and consummation of desire, should be associated with love and wisdom.

To satisfy those of you who want theory, Leonardo Boff explains the sacramental principle: The structure of desire itself, when it is invoked with sincerity, naturally embodies permanent reference to and inclusion of God. If the goal of all human desire is God, does this mean that God is to be found at the heart of all desire? (A thoroughly Christian incarnational answer is yes.) The image of God in us IS the infinity of our desire.

God's desire for us: Deeply fixed in the consciousness of many Christians is the image of a passionless, detached God whose perfection is to be self-contained, still and at rest. If we believe ourselves to be created in the image of that God we can easily associate desire and passion with lack of balance, confusion, loss of control and dangerous subjectivity. As a consequence, human love for God has been treated for centuries as unique, disconnected from all other forms of human loving. In one Bible study group, the idea of God as lover came up. The reaction of one devout older woman, with her southern upbringing still evident in her voice, was immediate: "Yuck--I have never heard of anything so revolting!"

To insist, as the classical Christian tradition does, that God is ultimately beyond anything we can know has to be held in creative tension with our incarnational faith that the presence of God may be found in all human experiences.

Eight Recommendations

1. See desire as a value to be fostered, not a blind force that has to be curbed. When it is demonized, desire is given more "shadow-power"; as a value it is humanized and humanizing, and causes an increase of self-understanding, self-acceptance, self-transcendence.
2. Honor desire as an engine of liberation: desire transforms and opens me from chains of my customary way of being myself, from hanging on to things I no longer want and being able to admit I no longer want them, thus giving my journey a chance to move on.
3. Learn to discern deep desire in and under superficial wants and needs vicariously through films and literature; communally through dialog and shared stories; and personally by taking the risks involved in attending to desires.
4. Restore sexual passion and arousal to desire, rescuing it from ill-conceived attempts to subject it to the will or harness it to conventional stereotypes.
5. See personal growth as a progressive liberation of desire. Each desire attended takes us to a deeper place, not to despair that what I have must be held on to because that is all there is.
6. Learn to let go of the erroneous thinking that often shapes our adult perceptions of love.
7. Explore, articulate, and teach healthy ways of cultivating and tending desire.
8. Praise God with Thomas Traherne: "For giving me desire which in my soul did work and move, that never could be satisfied, that incessantly suggested a Paradise Unknown and bore me to it, thy name be ever praised" ("Desire" 1991).

Finally, I repeat the quote with which I opened. "Desire is love trying to happen. It is the love that permeates all the universe, trying to happen in me. It draws into its fulfilling meaning all the appetites of our physical being. It turns the need for shelter into the sacrament that is a house. And it turns the need for food and drink into a gourmet feast. It turns sexual passion into...ah"...the presence of God! JT

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