

Ethical Eroticism as a Call to Love Fearlessly: Reimagining Sexuality as Our Passion for justice

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I want to express a word of gratitude. What we know about sexual and other abuse, we know only because of the courage, tenacity, and generosity of survivors who have told their stories, shared their wisdom, and modeled the kind of willfulness and spunk that spark a moral revolution. To survivors everywhere we should say, "More power to you!" To those who would be allies and justice advocates, I'd remind us of Kate Millett's insight that "The work of enlarging human freedom is such nice work, we're lucky to get it." 1

.Exploring the notion of "good sex" has, quite frankly, been less pleasurable and more of a headache than the original title of this presentation, "What Makes 'Good Sex' Good?" might otherwise suggest. What's true about other humanly significant matters seems true, as well, about sex: talking the talk is no substitute for walking the walk. Even so, I'm convinced that it's worthwhile to talk together about what makes sex good. The question I bring to this dialogue is this: What difference might an ethical eroticism make to our living, our loving, and our efforts to reduce abuse and other suffering in the world? 2

In the scheme of things, does sex matter? Furthermore, should sex matter to religious people, especially to those who wish to attend to matters of consequence and make a difference? For myself, the answer is unequivocally yes, sex matters. In defense of this claim, I offer two reasons.

The first reason sex matters is personal but also political. Sexuality is an occasion for joy but also pain. Any ethic worth its salt will pay attention to both the joy and the sorrow. Sexuality is our human capacity for intimacy and

human connection and, therefore, intrinsic to our humanity. Without sexuality, we would be something but not human as we know ourselves and others to be. As an ethicist, I'm persuaded that this marvelously embodied desire for connection and communication is also integral to the moral nudges we humans experience, deep in our souls, as hunger and thirst for right relation. Sexuality is a passionate spark, deep within, that energizes us for justice-making as well as love-making. This incredible gift moves us beyond ourselves to connect, be with, and take pleasure in the company of others. In sustaining this self-other connection, people do not lose themselves so much as realign themselves in their "in-betweenness," which is home also for the Divine. In this process of making connections, they and we become larger, different, and miraculously, more themselves, more ourselves.

Pleasure and desire are components of the moral life that are often neglected, even disparaged, and so it is important, perhaps especially in religious circles, to recognize that sexual desire is a primary means of affirming one's personhood. On the one hand, becoming aware of sexual desire (and of being desirable) is intimately bound up with a person's securing a strong sense of his or her moral agency and capacity for self-direction. On the other hand, repression of sexual desire makes people of and uncomfortable with their feelings. Discomfort with feelings is morally significant because when people lose touch with their feelings, including sexual feelings, they lose an interior compass and become more susceptible to social control and manipulation.

Body-right or bodily self-determination, the right to control one's own body and its use, is foundational for the moral development of loving, empathic persons capable of responsible decision making. Catholic theologian Christine Gudorf has suggested that among the strongest proof for the moral importance of body-right may be the effects of sexual abuse on victims, as well as what's involved in their process of recovery.

"When [persons of any age are] repeatedly forced to respond to the abuser's feelings and desires, and to disregard their own, eventually [they] lose touch with their own feelings and desires. Lack of access to one's feelings is the ultimate form of alienation; it is alienation from the self. Victims of longstanding sexual abuse speak of not knowing who they are or what they want. They have lost contact with their authentic self." 3

Recovery from abuse involves reclaiming one's authenticity as a thinking, feeling, and valuing person, as a somebody literally embodied in oneself who takes up space and is recognizable as a person who matters in one's own right, as subject and not only object. Coming to regard oneself as worthwhile

includes honoring oneself as someone who deserves respect, protection, and care, but also the recognition of oneself as a sexual person capable of giving and receiving love. Recovery from abuse often involves a process of regaining one's personal power by making small but meaningful decisions in one's own behalf. "Offering the victim choices," Gudorf explains, "confirms to the victim that someone thinks she can make responsible choices, which further encourages feelings of selfworth and responsibility, and restores some semblance of power." 4 Bodily self-determination and holding onto one's own perceptions of what feels good, right, and pleasurable are key components in the lifelong moral formation of persons as self-reflective, conscientious, moral agents.

The second reason sex matters is political but also personal. When rapid social change occurs, social disease surfaces as moral panics about sexuality. Anxiety about the family, about men's and women's changing roles, and about the shape of the future only escalates because of the cultural association of sexuality with danger, disorder, and contagion. Social panic about AIDS illustrates this social-sexual linkage. Concerns about society and, therefore, about the corporate body are expressed in terms of mounting anxiety about the personal body and its vulnerability to disease and assault. In times of cultural stress, boundaries become highly contested sites of conflict and struggle. In the process, boundary maintenance can sometimes take on disproportionate significance as people search for ways to manage their fears.

A common strategy for reducing anxiety about the body, sexuality, and social change is to project fear and social panic onto less powerful groups and demonize them as the sexualized Other. The culturally marginalized become the carriers of the majority's own unresolved concerns and are discredited as threats to established norms. The dominant group then feels morally entitled, even obligated, to fixate on the problematic sexuality of the marginalized, now labeled deviant and harmful.

In our time, a reactionary men's rights movement, including the Promise Keepers, has fixated on women's changing status and the rise of feminism. We see a similar dynamic in how married persons displace anxiety by scrutinizing the sex lives of single persons. Many heterosexuals feel at liberty to moralize about gay men and lesbians, and some gay men and lesbians fret endlessly about bisexual and transgendered people. Because this defensive, largely unconscious strategy keeps the problem of cultural disruption "out there," people avoid selfexamination, feel self-righteous, and fail to confront their issues as their own.

In the midst of cultural crisis, as a global capitalist economy undermines community and displaces countless people, sex and sexuality are far from frivolous matters (if they ever were, in fact, frivolous). In changing times, attending to sexual matters has become morally imperative because, as anthropologist Gayle Rubin points out, "people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sex." "Consequently," she cautions, "sexuality should be treated with special respect in times of great social stress."⁵ The challenge before us, ready or not, is to gain fresh moral insight into our cultural context, including the stresses and strains on human intimacy and community, and to call people to account when, out of panic and often pain, they or we blame ourselves or look outward for scapegoats.

The cultural problematic is twofold. First, in a sex-phobic culture, enemies are easily created by simply caricaturing others as sexually deviant, so easily in fact that scapegoating has taken on an air of moral virtue. We must neither fall for, nor hide behind, such facile moralisms. Second, in order to confront this evil of dehumanizing others and withholding community, we must not only take responsibility for our projections, but also learn to stand in solidarity with the marginalized. Entering into solidarity will not be easy because to do so, we must face our own terror of being dismissed, and perhaps also punished, as outsiders, "no better than" those stigmatized as sexual deviants. Real, concrete solidarity is never simple in a culture that ranks everything and everyone as less or better than. In gospel terms, solidarity requires us to risk being made equal to "the least of these."

Given this challenge, how could invoking the moral goodness of erotic desire possibly help us confront the widespread and horrific problem of sexual abuse, sexual commercialization, and sexual exploitation of both children and adults, at home and abroad? After all, isn't eroticism part and parcel, and perhaps even the root, of the problem? In asking this question, I'm mindful of H. L. Mencken's observation: "For every human problem there is a solution that is simple, plausible, and wrong." So, let's throw caution to the wind and examine the contours of an ethical eroticism as a call to love fearlessly.

If we are living, as I believe we are, within a deep-seated cultural crisis, which includes a major upheaval within sexuality and family life, there is good reason to be cautious about how the problem of human sexuality is typically defined, as well as with the solutions offered. Because of the Christian tradition's longstanding ambivalence, if not outright negativity about sexuality, many people inside and outside the Church regard human sexuality with a combined fear and fascination bordering on fixation. Sex is something many Christians love to hate and hate to love. Therefore, for many, sex itself is

the problem. In their moral imaginations, to speak about the sacred goodness of erotic passion is unthinkable. Their moral inclination is to repress sexual desire and try to contain it safely within familiar institutional controls of celibacy and marriage.

As a Christian liberation ethicist who is also gay, I cast the moral problem and its solution differently. Sexuality encompasses more than genital sex and, when understood comprehensively, expresses our embodied longing for intimacy and community. Erotic power is a precious gift we humans may use or misuse, often with tragic consequences for self, others, and the community itself. In this light, the moral problematic is not sex or even strong eroticism, but rather the perversion of human desire by sexual injustice. Injustice here means the distortion of human relationality. The fact that sexism, racism, and heterosexism are tolerated by so many people, the fact that some people find pleasure in causing pain, the fact that other people tolerate and even welcome pain as their due, the fact that alienation from our bodies and from others is taken as "just the way it is," therein lies our sexual crisis. Sexual sin is found in the creation of the sexualized Other, in the denial and mechanization of pleasure, and in the routine violation of bodies and spirits. Because capitalist culture reduces all value to what can be possessed and turned into disposable property, for many, many people, mutuality as a moral value simply no longer makes sense. The goodness of nonpossession, of freely negotiated and mutually respectful relations, or of a dynamic, open-ended sharing of power and vulnerability has become nearly incomprehensible in our culture. In fact, justice as mutual respect and care has become for many people an erotic turnoff.

By and large, faith communities have failed to grasp the depth and scope of this moral crisis and not wrestled sufficiently with the ever-changing, ever-adapting patterns of racist patriarchal culture and its normative claims on everyday life. In this culture, the kind of sex scripted as normative is racist patriarchal sex. Eroticism is about having someone under your control or feeling safe by being placed under another's power. Control is erotically charged, and compliance to authority titillating. Further more, a patriarchal ethic grants permission only for those erotic exchanges in so-called private that uphold the gendered social hierarchy of male dominance. All social relations, including sexual relations, are restricted according to gender, race, and class, but gender ordering is particularly effective in personalizing social alienation. The critical insight here is that sexuality conditioned by male gender supremacy eroticizes power inequalities. For this reason, many heterosexual men are turned on by female powerlessness and turned off by strong, assertive female partners. Through such skewed eroticism, people

accept in their bodies, as well as in their psyches, that sexism is right and natural and, further, that male gender supremacy feels good. For many men especially, gender injustice feels pleasurable and is experienced as a source of delight rather than the moral offense it is. As patriarchal constructions take hold in the body, erotic energy is annexed to oppression. It is fair to say that in this culture, human desire is in trouble.

Power as sexualized domination is extremely effective in corrupting people's souls because injustice is felt, not conceptualized. Patriarchy is acquired at the somatic, feeling level of our being. What does that mean? It means that male gender supremacy is not simply thought about, but rather sensed through actions giving rise to feelings of "being a real man," in charge and entitled to deference from females and other social subordinates. When many men have sex, the power and control they feel in the "when," the "how," and the "to whom" they feel sexual either confirms, or fails to confirm, their socially constructed, gendered identity as men. Patriarchal sex reinforces men's deeply felt, somatized sense of being social superiors, but it doesn't stop there. Supremacist sexuality conditions men and women alike to respond sexually not only to persons of the "right" gender, but also of the "right" race and "right" class. Only persons from the right social status are judged marriageable, that is, considered suitable as partners because they line up with dominant cultural norms.

Insights about the cultural construction of sexuality within patriarchal social relations point us toward locating the crisis of sexuality not narrowly within a few pathological individuals, but rather within the social order itself and its ideology of dominant/subordinate relations as normative. So where are we? In the dominant culture, sex is imagined as an unequal social exchange between a social superior and a social inferior. It ceases to be about love or sharing mutual pleasure between willing partners. Sex is instrumentalized as a control dynamic between a powerful subject and "his" submissive object. Unfortunately, traditional Christian sexual ethics is implicated in this mess because it, too, has perpetuated an ethic of male entitlement and male ownership of women and female bodies. A patriarchal Christian sex ethic differentiates "good" and "bad" sex by the particular use that men make of women. Good sex is when a man uses a woman rightly for procreation. Bad sex is when a man uses a woman for pleasure. However, what the patriarchal religious imagination fails altogether to envision is sex as mutually desired, pleasurable touch between peers who are sexual subjects, one to the other. Patriarchy doesn't "get it." If it did, it wouldn't be patriarchy!

If we are ever to move beyond racist patriarchal politics and morality, we must break with this power-and-control paradigm. We must find creative ways to enter into, and not just talk about, genuine solidarity with women, gays, and people of all colors, and with survivors of sexual and domestic abuse, all of whom are rising up in resistance to erotic injustice in this culture. But here's the rub. Most people associated with institutionalized religion have been taught to fear difference. Therefore, they avoid flesh-and-blood contact with people "not like them," especially with respect to sexuality. However, when people lack real-life connection with those harmed by the prevailing sex/gender, class, and racial system, they not only fail to comprehend the real world, they also have trouble discerning injustice in their own lives. Because so many middle strata white people are woefully out of touch with their own pain, they are sadly in no position to perceive the pain of others. Confused about the cultural crisis around them, they become frightened, susceptible to ideological manipulation, increasingly reactionary, and increasingly dangerous to themselves and others.

The way forward, and there is a way forward, is narrow and demanding. It requires a life-long commitment to listen to, and learn from, those on the margins and a willingness to join them in rebuilding the kind of community in which no one is excluded and no one devalued. As one component of that larger movement of community reformation, the feminist, gay liberation, and anti-abuse movements are calling for a reordering of human sexual relations toward erotic justice. Each of these broad-based, grassroots movements is based on solidarity lived out as concrete accountability to those who suffer and to those who actively resist oppression. It is from these movements that fresh moral wisdom is emerging about ethics and eroticism. An ethical eroticism, at odds with patriarchal norms and values, aims at enhancing the safety, respect, pleasure, and freedom of persons, especially those who are most vulnerable. It is, at one and the same time, strongly anti-abuse and strongly sex-positive.

As to our central question, what makes "good sex" good, my own answer can be briefly stated. Good sex is the kind of touching that is both powerful to the senses (that is, erotically "charged") and ethically principled. Sex is not doing something to someone else, but rather a mutual process of being with and feeling with another. Persons, not merely body parts, meet and touch. An ethical eroticism requires paying attention to that other person, as well as to oneself. Both parties must show up, be listened to and taken seriously, and be accountable for what happens, together.

In my judgment, our moral interest should be in eroticizing mutual respect and pleasure as moral goods to be desired in all relations, both sexual and nonsexual. Four core commitments are helpful in focusing our ethical concern: honoring the goodness of the body (and of diverse bodies), granting every person's entitlement to bodily integrity and moral self-direction, insisting on mutual consent and respect even if love is not (yet) present, and valuing a fidelity grounded in honesty and the willingness to change.

While exploring these matters, I've reached a rather unexpected conclusion, at least for a Christian ethicist. I'm convinced that we do not need a separate sex ethic and certainly not an ethic poised and ready to control our sexuality. In fact, such an ethic may do more harm than good. In saying this, I am not arguing for a moral free-for-all. Rather, I'm departing from the legacy of a patriarchal Church and culture that fears erotic power, devalues the body, and, above all else, seeks to keep men in charge by controlling women's lives and women's bodies within a complex set of male-controlled institutions, including male-dominant marriage. It is patriarchy that stigmatizes those who fail to conform to sexist, racist, and elitist notions of proper male and female roles. And it is patriarchy that defines gay people as the cultural exemplars of sexual non-conformity who by definition become sexual outlaws.

If, as I am arguing, special controls on sexuality are not necessary, and if our safety is not dependent on fear-based strategies to restrain erotic power, then is there a place for a sex ethic? My own answer is a qualified yes. Although we don't need an ethic that regards sex as dangerous, dirty, or chaotic or a moral code that singles out sex for regulation, we can benefit from an adequate life ethic that incorporates the erotic as an essential dimension of our humanity. Eroticism is an indispensable human power, one that- contrary to patriarchal fears -we are able to direct with wisdom and compassion. This more comprehensive life ethic will honor the moral goodness of respectful touching, but refuse to single out genital touching as especially worrisome or morally significant. Instead, this ethical approach will value sexual expression between persons, but not to the exclusion or detriment of other modes of communication. Its primary focus is the quality of respect and care in relationships, the distribution and use of power, and protecting vulnerable persons from abuse, exploitation, and neglect.

Such an ethic, at long last, will give sex its due and, at the same time, break with patriarchy's fear about all things sexual. Sexuality is an important, even treasured, aspect of our lives, but we can acknowledge its importance without reinforcing racist patriarchy's genital fixation. The moral focus properly belongs on issues of power and safety, including maintaining health and

avoiding unintended pregnancy. An ethic should seek not to control people, but rather to empower them for responsible self-direction. An emancipatory ethic encourages people to negotiate fairly and gain confidence and skills at receiving others as friends and intimates.

When you and I love fearlessly, we cannot help but make a difference in the large and small places of our lives. This call to love fearlessly anticipates a final word about the difference "good sex," that is, sensuous and morally principled sex, might make in our cultural context. In our highly stratified social order, love is diminished by injustice, more specifically by sexism, racism, heterosexism, classism, and cultural elitism. Oppression constricts people's natural affections to a small and often closed social circle. In a culture marked by white racial supremacy and male gender supremacy, people rarely exhibit what Patricia Hill Collins calls "big love." Big loving depends on creating the social conditions that make mutual respect and trust possible, so that men can love and truly value women, whites can see blacks as fully human, and men-loving-men and women-loving-women are respected as community members with full dignity. In the midst of multiple oppressions, our affective knowledge, that is, our embodied moral knowing about our common humanity is distorted. The wondrous capacity to identify with others and delight in our differences "must be distorted on the emotional level of the erotic," Collins argues, "in order for oppressive systems to endure." ⁷ Oppression creates fear, and fear becomes misdirected as fear of differences rather than focused more appropriately as a healthy fear of and revulsion toward domination itself. When oppression is no longer resisted, human love becomes smaller and smaller, more and more narrowly circumscribed, and increasingly preoccupied with safety. Basic human feelings of trust, respect, affection, and playful curiosity about diversity become corrupted, and our fellow feeling - our sisterly and brotherly feeling - becomes greatly attenuated.

Doing our spiritual work means confronting the depth of this cultural crisis and appreciating how justice in all social relations is foundational to good loving. Most social and religious conservatives name the moral problematic differently, as disregard for the conventional controls they judge necessary to channel human sexual interest exclusively toward heterosexual monogamy. We must name and locate the crisis elsewhere. "The tragedy of our so-called sexual morality," Beverly Harrison writes, "is that mutual respect and eroticism are utterly separated in the lives of most people." As if that were not enough, people who "lack a genuine power of eroticism . . . [often] assuage their emptiness by controlling others."⁸

Is there a word of hope here? Perhaps not immediately because, as lesbian feminist theologian Carter Heyward observes, "sexual justice [may be] the most trivialized, feared, and postponed dimension of social justice in western society and, possibly, in the world."⁹ However, the good news is that across the globe women, gay men, survivors of sexual assault and abuse, and our allies of all colors, classes, and sexualities are rising up, naming sexual abuse and other injustice as evil, and organizing resistance everywhere. In this holy resistance movement, hope is literally embodied as our unquenchable passion for justice and as our refusal to dismiss any suffering as inconsequential. Our moral and spiritual commitment is to leave no one out and leave no one behind. Loving well, we are coming to understand, requires pursuing justice in all social relations, including those closest to our skin. In short, we need a liberating ethic of sexuality that turns us on to justice, in our bedrooms and beyond. In this radical loving, we discover, much to our surprise and delight, a phenomenal measure of joy because, as Alice Walker points out, resistance is the secret of joy.¹⁰ The moral here is that the smaller our love, the less power we will have. Stated positively, the bigger our love and the greater our courage to transgress the norms of racist patriarchy, the more we will acquire the kind of moral power that is able to deepen and extend community. Moral power thrives on our loving expansively. Big love takes the body and its pleasures seriously as moral guides and resources, especially when we journey forth without maps.¹¹

Could it be that the appalling absence of passion in our churches, the pervasive indifference to injustice, and the astounding apathy about suffering near and far, are all linked to the repression of erotic power and the refusal to search for an ethical eroticism? Could it be that moral and spiritual renewal is intimately tied up with reclaiming the goodness of our bodies and celebrating their power to reveal the sacred? If this is so, and I believe it is so, then we face a formidable challenge. As Audre Lorde writes, "We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings."¹² The erotic, she observes, is our capacity for joy. Precisely for this reason, the erotic is feared because, if taken seriously, it requires that we live according to our deepest, truest knowledge of our capacity for pleasure and right relation, not only in the bedroom but in all our pursuits.

For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our lives' pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing ourselves to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave

responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe. 13

Safety, to be sure, is an essential value in relationships, but we must grasp for more and expect more of ourselves. We must struggle to join together what has been tragically rendered asunder in our living and our loving: on the one hand, our longing for pleasure, joy, and at-homeness in our bodies, and on the other hand, our desire for justice throughout our social world. The good news is that our deepest yearnings for love can be satisfied only as we enlarge our commitments to doing justice - passionately with others. To use traditional theological language, health and salvation are found through a wholehearted, full-bodied devotion to God and in radically loving this precious, fragile planet with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

May this passion be fierce in you, all the days of your life. ME

1. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), xii. 2. For more extensive discussion, see Marvin M. Ellison, *Erotic justice: A Liberating Ethic of Sexuality* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1996). 3. Christine E. Gudorf, "Embodying Morality," *Conscience* (Winter 1993-94), 17. 4. *Ibid.*, 18. S. Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1992), 3-4. 6. Rosemary Radford Ruether, "Homophobia, Heterosexism, and Pastoral Practice," in *Sexuality and the Sacred: Sources for Theological Reflection*, ed. James B. Nelson and Sandra P. Longfellow (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 387-96. 7. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1991), 182 and 196. 8. Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 148. 9. Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 4. 10. Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1992). 11. Carter Heyward, "Coming Out: Journey Without Maps," in *Our Passion for Justice: Images of Power, Sexuality, and Liberation* (New York: The Pilgrim Press, 1984), 75-82. 12. Audre Lorde, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (Trumansburg, NY: The Crossing Press, 1978), 6. 13. *Ibid.*, 5.

