

Sexuality and Spirituality

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Joan H Timmerman PhD is a professor in the department of theology at the College of Saint Catherine in Saint Paul, Minnesota. In 1997 she received the first Ann O'Hare Graff Award from the Women's Seminar of the Catholic Theology Society of America for integrating theology and life in her writing and teaching. She will present a keynote address on the topic at the upcoming ISTI national conference.

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What are young women saying about their sexual lives in relation to their spiritual journeys? For the past fifteen years I have taught the elective course "Sexuality and Spiritual Growth" at the College of Saint Catherine, a comprehensive urban college in St Paul, Minnesota, for women. The course offers credit in theology and women's studies. The majority of the students whose opinions are reflected in this article are 20 to 22 years old, though an increasing percentage of student are over 25 and returning to complete a degree. These older students often come back to school as single parents or after some other major life disruption. Typically, they are in search of newness in both identity and relationships.

Since 1990 I have asked students for permission to use passages from selected papers they have written - passages that help convey a sense of the transformation of awareness, value, and commitment that accompanies their academic study of sexuality within a theological context. Many of these women are from rural midwestern towns and are in the first generation of their families to attend college; others come from such cities as Chicago, New York, Missoula, Omaha, Denver, and San Diego. The international students from Africa, Asia, France, Denmark, the Czech Republic, and Australia add interesting perspectives and sometimes stop the conversation short with stories of initiation and courtship that confound all expectations.

The insights offered in this essay are not conclusions based on research. Rather, they are bits of truth-telling by women about their own lives.

NEW ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUALITY

Young women are hoping to claim their place on the future side of a paradigm shift. While not all have participated consciously in, or even been aware of, the shift from traditional to postmodern attitudes toward the body, they know that something major has happened between their parents' childhoods and their own maturity. An academic witness would say that the mind-body split that has dominated Western thinking for two millennia has lost its power. One student explained, It never occurred to any of us (as children) that people had sex for any other reason than to have children. Some of our parents had talked to us about sex, but they'd

never told us that it was pleasurable. In all fairness, I'm not sure that I would have believed my mother if she had told me this, it seemed like such a gross thing to do, why would anyone do it unless they had to? Sex can certainly be a spiritual, loving experience shared by two married heterosexuals intent on creating a family, but sexuality as a whole encompasses far more than this traditional "Catholic" norm. It may be that parents are afraid to educate their children about sexuality in its entirety because they don't want to encourage behavior that falls outside the realm of the traditional religious norm.

But neither do traditional Catholic norms prepare the laity to expect a full, rich, and intentional spiritual life. Why should we be surprised to discover that norms that define the minimal in terms of spirituality also support the minimal in the sexual sphere? The theology of marriage, had it developed in another direction from that which we know historically, might have disclosed carnal intimacy as full of rich and pleasurable sexuality. The monastic way, after all, promised the ecstatic joys of the unitive way to the selected few. As it is, we now must utilize the tool we have: a spirituality that is increasingly being claimed as the primary call of all. Spirituality is the force that promises to heal the scars, anger, and regret that remain from our sexual unfolding. Spirituality is described, for the purpose of discussing sexual development, to be coincident with the process of individuation; that is, it grows through an expansive movement from the "skin-encapsulated ego" to the experience of a larger connected self. In each sexual crisis resides a moment of spiritual opportunity,. The process is often remedial, understood long after it has been negotiated as raw experience.

Students compose their spiritual identity by reading backwards through their relational and sexual journeys. The spiritual journeys, ironically, are marked by a recovery, not a diminishment, of feeling and sensuality, compassion and vulnerability. I find it useful to describe spirituality as the way the whole person (body and mind) responds to the presence of what is "really real" in the here and now. The category of whole person assumes an authenticity, a consonance between inner desire and outer expression; it also implies a movement toward activity in the larger world. The element of response suggests that the initiating call to spiritual growth comes from life itself, is a call to deep adventure, and is made in the context of personal freedom. The phrase "really real" (to borrow a phrase from Mircea Eliade) presumes at the center of the universe a loving Thou who is in relationship to every person. "In the here and now" affirms that the spiritual life is lived at every moment as a dimension of every act of human life. Its content is the ordinary, not the extraordinary experiences of a normal life. As has been said, don't wait for special conditions to "become" spiritual; if you cannot be so here and now, you cannot be so at all.

For a professor of theology, finding language that is not narrowly religious with which to describe spiritual states of desire for and union with a transcendent reality is one of the greatest challenges at this creative time in the history of our culture. Some clues come from the health care field, where guidelines for doing qualitative research have led to definitions such as Pamela Reed's on spirituality as the "propensity to make meaning through a sense of relatedness to dimensions that transcend the self in such a way that empowers and does not devalue the individual." Such relatedness may be experience within oneself, in the context of

others and the environment, and transpersonally - that is, in relation to the unseen, God, the sacred, or a power greater than self. Though it suggests no specific religious content, such a notion of spirituality expands the individual's boundaries inward, outward and upward. Spirituality, then, can be recognized; it is manifested through various patterns of connectedness, "in which one steps beyond the structures of everyday existence to endow the ordinary with extraordinary meaning." Once a group of seekers has a common vocabulary, the discussion can begin.

LACK OF COMMUNICATION PERSISTS

It is regularly assumed that this generation has been the beneficiary of a more open attitude toward sex talk. However, the young women in my course indicate that there is still awkward silence on the subject between many parents and children: At the age of twelve I had a physical. When the nurse asked me if I had my period yet, I did not know what a period was. As my mother and I left the doctor's office and we exited through the waiting room I exclaimed, "Mom, what's a period?" My mother seemed extremely embarrassed by what seemed like an innocent question to me. She told me to be quiet about it and that we would discuss it at home. We didn't. My best friend and I discussed it at a sleepover. The last time I went home I asked my mother why we were not talked to about sex. She feels it is because she was never taught anything about sex as a child either. Because of my discomfiting experiences regarding sex and sexuality, I am not going to let sex be silenced for another generation. I am going to educate my children and let them know that their bodies and their sexuality are nothing to be ashamed or feel embarrassed about. Young women are clear about the consequences of ignorance: I can now reflect on what happened to me as a result of the sheltering behavior of my parents. If I would have known at the age of 13 what a blow job was, I would not have had to be shown by a 15-year-old boy. I did not want to be the only girl in my school who did not know again, so instead, I made sure I knew what everything was, so I would be the most informed and the most knowledgeable. One day I had to tell them I was a pregnant 16-year-old.

Another woman wrote, "My mother and I never spoke of sex, in fact the only time she did speak of sex was when she was driving me to college and she told me to watch out for those boys, cause there is only one thing they want. But that was all she said."

The narrative has not changed much in fifteen years of teaching and reading personal essays with titles like "how I learned about Good and Evil." Sex, love and relationships between boys and girls were not discussed in my family of origin. When I was twelve my mother handed me a booklet explaining menstruation. She told me to read it and then walked away. I remember the confusion I felt as I held this paper, obviously of some significance, in my hand. Months later when my period began, I did not tell my mom and she did not comment on the bloody stains on my underwear. Somehow I knew I had experienced something forbidden and very private.

Over and over the stories are told - not reflections of an enlightened time, but accounts of sexual ignorance and fear and their power to hang on. The research says that parents believe they talk to their children about sex, yet their grown children claim that there were no such

conversations. The young women I know do not blame their parents, who mostly were filled with love and concern for their "angel" children. The combination of innocence and knowledge of sex was too difficult for most to negotiate. The stories are tragic, despite the good will all round - stories of hearts filled with love yet bound tightly in sexual shame passed from generation to generation.

SEX AND SPIRITUALITY LINKED

The possible connection between sexuality and spiritual growth is a new, strange, and sometimes weird idea to these young women: I never thought my sexuality was an integral part of my spirituality. I viewed sex as similar to exercise - only easier to perform and providing a lot more pleasure. But as I began listening and reading, my perceptions began to expand. Particularly intriguing to me was the concept of Eros as the drive in all living things towards union with the divine. When I reflected on this idea, I began to see examples of erotic activity in my life. The integration of sexuality and spirituality started to make sense. It is difficult to articulate, but when I am involved in the plant research I love, there is a part of me that feels a connection with something divine. The connection goes beyond the intellectual --there is a physical manifestation to it also. Because I am doing something I love, I feel a harmony between all of me. My body and my spirit feel aligned and it feels like the force behind it all is God. This statement exemplifies the union and integration people feel when they submit to ecstatic experience. Living life as a call produces joy and a sense of intimacy; it leads to lifestyle choices that preserve balance and are characterized by prudent decisions made in commitment to one's long-term best interests rather than to law or in fear. The author's insight, as well as her ability to articulate the many potentially erotic activities in her life, enabled her to reflect more deeply on her relationship with her husband: I had always felt that there was a divine force in our union but had always separated our sexual relationship into a category that was "just" physical. But now it is very apparent that when we are making love is the time we are the closest to the divine. When I am making love to my husband there is a point when it is no longer only the physical stimulation but I actually lose part of my body and the incredible rush of feeling is coming from my spirit. In fact, when we are together sexually, it is the closest we ever get to each other.

A 21-year-old nursing major wrote, "I will be working in community health clinics which offer services to those who are dealing with various sexual issues. My mind has been opened to discuss such issues without unnecessary reservations but with honesty and sincerity." Awareness is a theme common to spirituality and to the task of sexual self-acceptance. It goes without saying that unless people are aware, they can neither heal nor change.

PSYCHOLOGICAL MATURITY IS KEY

There are others who have not yet left their prolonged adolescence - which will only end when they are no longer afraid to disappoint their parents. I think the reason I never asked questions was because I thought that if I had, my mother would think I had engaged in some type of sexual activity. I did not want my parents knowing that I was sexually involved because it was

considered taboo. I did not want them looking down on me. Now that I am older and not living under my parents' roof I still do not tell my mom more than the bare minimum, because she is not yet able to handle all that information.

Gail Sheehy, writing about the twenty-something generation, observed that a dramatic shift in psychological maturity appears to occur in most young people toward the end of their twenties. They may have something to do with the awareness of "another zero" coming up. Before this shift, men and women often feel unable to make clear choices or cope with life's problems without some help from parents. After the shift, they feel confident enough in their own values to make their own choices, even if those options clash with a parent's wishes. There may be another, less economic explanation: it may simply take twenty years or so for the human being to become sufficiently reflective to be truly "free" in a spiritual sense - a centered person characterized by self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and the desire for self-transcendence.

It takes time and commitment, but many young women are willing to practice spiritual disciplines, when they discover them, that cultivate a centered identity and make for greater depth of self-knowledge, self-acceptance, and self-transcendence. "Practicing meditation," one woman wrote, "seems to provide me strength to continue another day, to experience a new morning. Each person needs that, I believe, in order to set things right in oneself. It takes discipline each time. But I can't stop, nor do I intend to, because to be able to feel what spirituality is about is worth continuing on."

PRESSURES ABOUND

Today's young women remember and regret succumbing to the sexual stereotypes imposed on girls: Our reaction as girls (to the way boys looked at women) seemed to be to change our values and ourselves in order to get the emotional attention we craved. We formulated our standards and the way we walked, talked and acted, according to the sexy standards of society. But we were all a bunch of little girls trying to be women - without being able to handle all the things that come along with that. It was later on, however, that I reverted back to the visual and cinematic symbols of womanhood I had been given by society, and molded myself to what I was told was a real woman.

Young women are annoyed at the pressures from society to sexualize all relationships, to be heterosexual, to fear pleasure more than violence. One woman wrote, "People can't be friends; it all revolves around sex and gender." She was particularly rueful about the consequences of the commodification of sexuality in the media. A young woman's sexual radiance is such that it is easily stereotyped and objectified. As she attempts to define and redefine her own relationships to men and other women, as those of this postfeminist generation must, she finds her options limited. I feel that people need to rehearse different situations that involve sex just like they rehearse how to say "no" to drugs and how to escape their burning house. If young adults, especially young women, were equipped with the reality of situations involving sex they would be more prepared to face those situations. They need to be taught that they do have a choice. If someone wants to sleep with you, you can say no; it is an option.

For lesbian women the problem is especially acute. They know from experience that healthy acceptance of one's sexuality, as individual as a fingerprint, is a condition for its integration with one's center: If you are not free in your sexual life to experience your relationship happily, then experiencing that relationship as something spiritual is so much closer to impossible. It takes so much more work to overcome the societal values that tell you that you are wrong in your loving. It takes so much more energy, faith, love, strength, and perseverance to continue, woman loving woman, working toward a spiritual life in your sexuality and in your relationship. Because they must deal with this at least by their twenties, gay and lesbian students are showing others the way. There are two kinds of people, and the difference between them is not whether they are gay or straight. The radical difference in experience is between those who have integrated their sexuality into their lives and those who haven't - between those who have come into their own sexuality and those who act without attending to the need for consonance between their inner and outer lives.

Societal prejudices like heterosexism contribute to weakening the link between spirituality and sexuality in lesbian relationships, but they also contribute to a lowered sense of self for women in general. In a heterosexist, patriarchal world, loving yourself as a woman becomes in itself a feat. As Mary Hunt has written in her book *Sexuality and the Sacred* (edited by James Nelson and Sandra Longfellow), "loving other women, thus being free to love oneself, is good for every woman's health. This is nearly impossible under patriarchal, heterosexist influences." Lesbian women who followed their calling to integrate spirituality and sexuality have done it all against the odds. Dismantling heterosexism will give lesbians - and also heterosexual women - space in which they can be free to be who they are, to grow as they need to grow.

Young women are realistic about the costs of making choices in a time of breakdown of societal consensus. The summer between junior and senior high I was raped. I repressed the experience for a long time. I did not even acknowledge that I was raped until at least a year after the initial experience. Being raped at such a young age taught me that sex could just be taken. I learned that sex can be a powerful tool that men will use to dominate women. I learned that saying "no" does not always mean anything to a man. I eventually sought counseling where we worked on the issue of my being raped and other family and personal issues. This was the beginning in my healing from sexual abuse and learning more positive attitudes about sexuality.

Whether one has been hurt by another or has made choices show knows to be hurtful, she needs to find meaning for living her life. My determination has cost me a lot. The men I have left resent me for leaving them - don't I love them enough? Today American popular culture feeds us the notion of the superwoman - the woman with the ritzy job, chic clothes, wonderful husband, jet-set lifestyle and perfect children whom she still has time to care for. Impossible. I know it is because I have had to give up a lot of my dream. I wonder sometimes if I could have been happy. But whenever I find myself wishing we could go back to the fifties, I remember that so many women fought for the choice to live the life that I am living. If I have to go through a little heartache, so be it. I am free. This young woman feels confident enough in her own values to make her own choices and competent enough in life skills to set her own course -

even if that course clashes with a parent's wishes, a beloved partner's desire, or society's precedents.

SELECTIVITY INCREASING

Young women are marrying later and more selectively and renegotiating their relationships more intentionally. I've heard the adage, "you become one parent and marry the other." How true that is. I became my father and married a man who has many of my mom's dependency traits. Rather than he helping me to become autonomous and myself showing him how to be interdependent, we had switched roles. So, to recognize and reject my mother's dependency meant disdaining my husband's also. This is a constant source of friction in our relationship, a thorn often pressing into the flesh and spirit of one or both of us. Their very selectivity makes for the deferring of dreams. "I have a meaning in my life," one woman wrote. "I have purpose. However, I do not have complete meaning in my life. I have not loved, unconditionally, a sexual partner in my lifetime. Only at that point will I feel union."

One can predict that there will have to be some midlife resetting of goals and redefining of "union." Nevertheless, to desire and await such a completely fulfilling union must be part of the sacramentality of marriage.

CHURCHES AVOID SEXUALITY

Today's young women are critical - in a detached way - of religious organizations and traditional practices. As long as religious organizations ignore human sexuality beyond the reproductive scope, and as long as they try to repress sex education, the young people who need the most guidance are going to get their information from sources that breed harm instead of health. Many young people have become uninterested in the churches that deem them ignorant of their concerns. Since I was three years old, masturbation has been a part of my life. I distinctly remember going to youth group at church when I was in 7th grade and the youth minister saying at a sexuality retreat how two teenagers had masturbated each other and that it was "yuck." No matter what anyone said, I never thought of it as "evil" until my sophomore year of college when I read the Catechism of the Catholic Church. I then honestly went through a period when I felt evil for doing it and then even dropped it all together for a while. Shortly after, I started questioning everything of the Catholic/Christian tradition. When I have children, I am going to do a lot of things differently.

Another woman wrote, "Many people, especially women, fight old beliefs and teachings on sex and in return feel guilty." If these beliefs and teachings are worth holding, they have not heard a plausible reason why.

As Thomas J Reese writes (America, 6.21.97), "in the Catholic Church the battle about sex is over and no one has won. On questions of birth control, masturbation, premarital sex, divorce and remarriage, the hierarchy has lost most of the faithful." These young women are like the rest of the laity - muddling through making up their own minds without much help. The best

thing the leadership of Church communities could do at this time would be to engage people who are living their lives with good will and realism in some important listening sessions about the signs of grace and the signs of evil in the experience of sexual and marital relationships. "Don't ask, don't tell" is a rule that fails to promote personal growth as consistently in religious communities as it does in families.

FIGHTING DEGRADATION

This generation is in painful transition regarding cultural as well as religious traditions. A student from Africa wrote about female genital mutilation as practiced by her people: The Sabinu people of Uganda have been successfully fighting against female cutting for the past several years. It seems they have been able this year to completely abandon the tradition in favor of a symbolic ritual declaring her a woman without maiming her for life. This was achieved when the elders of the tribe were educated on the harmful effects of the practice, and then were able to educate the rest of the people. A variation on the rite of passage is now being used in Kenya - called the 'circumcision through words.' In this ceremony all the ritual of instruction and celebration exists, but the cutting is left out.

Young women are angry about pornography, and they do take it personally. Why cannot pornography, with its humiliation and degradation of women's bodies, be contained? One woman's answer: "A society that is permissive toward pornography can do nothing about it when pornographic images become mainstream culture." Another wrote, "A quiet current streams beneath every corner of society: women are hated." The solution to the problem is hard to come by, but even the most liberal of students believe it to be connected to better education. As one put it, "What we need is erotic education, with healthy sexual/relational images. We cannot censor in a free, capitalist society, but we can educate instead of closing our eyes."

A surprising number of these students have friends who have been exotic dancers or models or have profited in some way from the voyeurism of the American entertainment industry. They are perplexed and fascinated by this, even as they are unwilling to judge others' motives: I would be interested to see a study done of women in the sex industry on whether or not they would continue doing what they do if they were paid minimum wage. I used to believe that women were in control of themselves and if a woman chose to dance for men, it was actually she who was in control of the men, with her body, not them in control of her. I have a different view of it now as a result of recognizing I am on a spiritual journey.

Another student wrote, "What bothers me most about the porn and sex industry in our society is that the intimacy that is especially needed today is being replaced by emotional detachment and voyeurism. We should be bringing people together to touch each other's spirits. Pornography separates us from our spirits."

The eroticization of violence has been a defining characteristic of male love-maps. This has been shown by James Prescott, John Money, James Maddock, and others. If it is true that

violence is the regurgitation of pain, Western culture has some profound rethinking to do about the relative values of pleasure and pain and which is the greater to be feared. "I believe that so long as we blind ourselves to pornography," one student wrote, "all women and society as a whole will continue to be hurt. After seeing the film (Not A Love Story, Canada Film Board, 1986) I realized how unaffected I thought I was and how affected I really am.

A point of tension, of course, is the connection as well as the distance between what is pornographic and what is truly erotic: The feminist critique reveals that what was erotic art in the past is actually not erotic now. Erotic, then, was the pleasuring of the male master. The woman or girl who could please her master the most could be considered the most erotic. Today erotic takes on a whole new meaning; it is a sharing between two equal individuals. Much ancient erotica should be considered pornography today.

The search for the truly erotic, that which connects and unites rather than diminishes and isolates, is the deep adventure of daily life. Where is Eros? Where is the call to union?

INTEREST IN SPIRITUALITY

Young women are generous in acknowledging, affirming, and celebrating a spiritual eroticism in their daily lives. "After a lot of work," wrote one student, "I came up with a mission statement for my life: to embrace, express and educate in spiritual truth. So...I will take my mission statement and my education and I will grow, celebrate, fight, and educate."

An intuitive value for the sacredness of sexuality led one 28-year-old woman to make, with her fiancé, a vow of chastity until marriage. In explaining this to the class, she described many sexual encounters in her late teens, which became increasingly meaningless until she reached a point at which she experienced no sexual desire whatever. When she met the man she thought she might want to marry, she discussed her insight with him, and together they made and have kept their vow. They will be married soon, and she looks forward without shame or secrecy to their first experience of intercourse as a couple. This example shows the mature values that should characterize sexual integrity: concern with stewardship of desire and the moral strength to make a choice freely to love. Where self-control and asceticism come into play, they are the servants of freedom and love; ultimately, they are employed freely because they are recognized as being in one's long-term best interest. Here may be reason better than taboo and law for waiting: "I left behind a selfish and frightened person and found a much more giving and serene person."

It feels different to touch someone's body and to touch even your own if you have always been afraid to do so. I feel it is a healing for all that are involved. Once you have taken that step, then nothing is impossible. This I know because I have been there, and I'm not afraid to go there again. My hope is that one day someone will be there for me with the lotions, the oils, the prayers if I should ever need them, and not be afraid to touch my body in order to give me comfort and peace.

The process of integrating sexuality with spirit is not a women's issue; it belongs to humanity. Women wish men were more helpful. When I was sixteen, when I began to be sexually active, it was not hard for me to show my boyfriend my body because I was a very expressive person and basically I had a body that was in great shape. I don't have that free expressive feeling any more, and it upsets me and I suspect it upsets my boyfriend. It is difficult for me to let my boyfriend realize I am the only one who does not want to see my own body. I wish a man could help a woman feel the enjoyment they know in looking at even an imperfect body.

Indeed, human sexuality is a kind of call - a dynamic that is intrinsic to the person yet leads her to reach out in the most radical way. As James Hillman observes in *The Soul's Code*, this call is a prime fact of human existence. The students I have known become witnesses to the possibility that sexual experience can be religious experience. They want to align their life with the call to spiritual growth, and they can see that no accident or heartache is able finally to derail that growth toward wholeness. One wrote, "When I write reflections through which I strive to integrate spirituality and sexuality, this is a time when I feel most intellectually alive. My writings have been avenues for me to have conversations with God and others. I believe that it is essential that I respond to this call." Another summed it up with these words: "Since it is my goal to live my life as completely as I can, I need to find the integration of my physical and spiritual self." JT

RECOMMENDED READING

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