

“Uniting our Sexual and Spiritual Self”
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Williamsburg, Virginia
January 6, 2008

A few years ago, a writer published a short story called “Sexy.” (Interpreter of Maladies: Stories by Jhumpa Lahiri) It’s about a young woman in Boston named Miranda. She’s having an affair with a married man named Dev.

Dev is the first man to hold doors open for her,
the first to be the one to pay for things,
to kiss her hand across a table in a restaurant.

Watching her walk naked across the bedroom of her apartment, he says, “You’re the first . . . woman I’ve known with legs this long.”

Dev and Miranda go to a museum with one of those acoustically engineered spaces that makes it possible to hear someone thirty feet away speaking in a whisper. Dev stands at one end of the space: “say something.” Standing at the other end, Miranda whispers, “Hi.” He whispers back, “You’re sexy.”

Miranda buys a slinky silver cocktail dress with little chains for straps. Asked for an opinion, the sales clerk says, “Absolutely. He’ll want to rip it right off you.”

The next time Dev comes to her apartment, he’s wearing gym clothes. He comes right after he has gone jogging along the Charles River on Sunday afternoon, since he won’t be expected home. Their time together falls into this pattern: on each visit, Dev smokes three cigarettes and takes a twelve-minute nap after they have sex.

One day Miranda’s friend asks her to baby-sit her cousin’s seven-year-old son for an afternoon. The boy is precocious, asking endless questions, demanding to have coffee, roaming around her apartment exploring.

He comes out of her bedroom holding the silver cocktail dress, which he found on the floor of the closet. He asks her to put it on. She is taken aback, but he insists. She finally agrees. He looks at her in the dress and says, “You’re sexy.”

She asks him what that word means. He becomes shy, “I can’t tell you, it’s a secret.” She demands to know the secret. He closes his eyes then cups his hands around his mouth, “It means loving someone you don’t know.”

They sit together silently for a few minutes. The little boy falls asleep. Unlike Dev, he doesn’t wake up after twelve minutes. Miranda begins to cry softly. She knows she will never wear the silver cocktail dress to go anywhere with Dev. She knows their affair is simply another form of jogging.

This is just a story, of course. But listening to it, do you doubt that things like this are happening every day? It is a universal story of that most basic desire for sexual expression, grounded in a meaningful, relational life.

Sexuality is essential to our individual identity.

It's more than just gender identification.

It's a powerful energy that urges us to have physical intimacy with another person.

It's an energy that impels all of life.

We are living in a post-sexual-revolution world, and in many ways that makes us fortunate. We are free from repressive moralizing about sexual behavior, free from the hang ups of past generations. We are free to explore our sexuality with relatively less anxiety about unwanted pregnancy or disease.

We have more contraceptive choices,
new technology promising to enhance,
devices, potions, books and step by step dvd's.
new techniques promising to thrill.

Given all this wonderful freedom, one would think that our society would have a pretty healthy attitude toward human sexuality.

But it's clear that on the whole, we don't.

The Body is not revered, just revealed.

Bodies are unconnected to whole persons.

Bodies are segmented into parts;

they are sold and swapped in the marketplaces of gratification.

Bodies are used more, but not loved more.

This leaves some people feeling trapped in patterns of objectified sex, in which a person is either using others, being used by them, or both.

Sexuality has been reduced and narrowed to genital expression.

Other form of physical closeness or even emotional closeness are cast off, as side shows to the main event so that people who are not able or don't want to have intercourse feel unable to express their sexuality fully.

Sexually explicit images fill magazine racks; television, movie, and computer screens.

We've gone from a repression that said that sex is supposed to be hidden, even to the point of once covering the curvy legs of Victorian tables, to a relentless overexposure of sexual imagery in every public and private space.

I'm not objecting to pictures of naked bodies per se. I almost put one on the front cover of the order of service—but I wasn't sure how you would react.

The problem with most of the sexy photos out there is that they send the message that only those who match those images -- the young, slim and flexible--can be sexual. This leaves many people feeling ineligible or incapacitated, including older people, people with physical limitations, or those who have been wounded by sex.

Some people feel shut out the world of sexuality altogether. They have given up on this kind of fulfillment. They have bought into the cultural story that sexuality isn't for someone who looks like them. It is a feeling of not fitting the ruthless stereotypes, of not being able to conform to the invisible love laws that dictate who has to look like what, who can love whom and how, who is pretty enough to reveal himself, who is entitled to be sexual.

This shuts people out of the possibility of living a fuller life.

For some people, sex has become routine, tedious and unsatisfying – a habit governed by rhythms of convenience, capped off by three cigarettes and a twelve-minute nap.

In a recent poll by psychologists at the University of Texas, participants were asked why they had sex. (Harper's Magazine, January, 2008)

Here are some of their answers:

I wanted to get rid of a headache

I wanted to keep warm

I was physically forced

I was trying to reaffirm my sexual orientation

I wanted to humiliate the person

I wanted to burn calories

I was bored,

It became a habit.

I wanted to defy my parents

Someone offered me money

And then there are those of us who are neither excluded from sexuality nor bored, but are still out there looking for that silver cocktail dress, dreaming of someone with long legs, someone who will hold the door open for us and tell us we're sexy.

We search for love, but disguise our true desire with the mask of mechanical, detached sex. We hide our deepest longings behind provocative affectations because we are afraid. We're afraid that if we really revealed ourselves, we would be rejected.

It is a heartbreaking, futile effort to love and be loved by someone we do not know and are not known by. At best, it is merely sexy.

Our biggest spiritual need is to love and be loved.

This means seeing others and being seen for exactly who we are.

In a sexual relationship, we risk having our bodies seen by others and this can be a place of great vulnerability and great opportunity.

If this aspect of our selves is accepted, the acceptance is profound.
If this aspect of our selves is rejected, the rejection is profound.

So, this is an interesting subject, and an important cultural issue, but why are we talking about it in church?

GK Chesterton once said, “Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God.”

Could it be that there is a spiritual aspect to sexuality? Could it explain why so many people remain sexually unfulfilled in a world so full of sex?

A fully alive human being is body, mind and spirit acting in concert. We are not merely machines made of meat. There is something more in us, a spark of the divine, a primordial light, something that urges us to seek greater meaning and purpose for our lives.

We connect to our spiritual selves most often through our bodies, through feelings. Spiritual expression through our bodies can take many forms – playing sports, eating delicious food, creating art.

The sexual aspect of our physical being is a particularly important part of this spiritual expression.

Spiritual Sexuality points beyond the reproductive biological function, and even beyond physical pleasure, toward a unity with all life. Many of you know what this is like: a profound experience of the falling away of ego, the melting of boundaries, communion with a greater power.

This is a place of transformative possibilities.

We cannot go there with an ethic of sexuality like the old-fashioned repressive ones.

We also cannot go there with an ethic of sexuality like the new post-sexual revolution ones.

Because in both of these cultural environments, sexuality is severed from spirituality. Bodies are either shameful centers of sin or they are merely instruments of pleasure. Sexuality is either for reproduction only or it is a biomechanical exercise--just another form of jogging.

Every major religion has written or unwritten love laws – laws about whom you can have sex with and at what times and in what manner. Religious leaders used to have a lot to say about sexual behavior. Usually the message was don't do that!

Sex isn't talked about nearly so much these days--especially in liberal churches. When we do talk about it, it usually centers around individual rights, education, justice,

but it tends not to be spiritual. I don't think I've ever heard a sermon suggesting that a connection between religion and sex might be spiritually transformative.

In an article in the current UU World magazine, the Rev. Debra Hafner states that, "Sexuality is a religious issue because we have a commitment to helping young people develop a moral conscience, including an ability to make healthy decisions." She continues that because of our religious commitment to truth telling, we believe that people should have "full and accurate information that is not biased or censored." (UU World, Winter, 2007)

These are sound and sensible values that have guided us to strong leadership in the areas of reproductive choice, sexual violence, gay marriage, and sexuality education.

But they are all about individual freedom and civic responsibility. "Full and accurate information" about sex is absolutely important, but you can't make it into a spiritual or religious value just by putting the words "our religious commitment to" in front of it.

We need to reclaim sexuality as a spiritual value, not just as a political right. And that means we need to talk about sex in church.

Some may argue that sexuality is best left in the bedroom where it belongs. But isn't that what the ancient religious laws tried to do? To gather up sex and prescribe and proscribe where it belongs and where it doesn't belong?

In our religious community we have made promises and given permissions to one another about spiritual growth.

We have chosen to invite exploration of this and other sensitive spiritual issues through respectful dialogue among members of this very special community.

A few months ago, several of us joined the William & Mary UU students to watch the film, "So the Bible Tells Me So." The documentary featured several Christian parents whose children are gay and lesbian. One of those mothers revealed that after a long period of struggling with the biblical texts she realized that when it came right down to it, the thing she was most uncomfortable about was the physical sex. Not that her daughter was in any way unlovable or that her relationships were wrong, but she just didn't want to think about the kind of sex her daughter was having. It disturbed her, made her feel squeamish. This was powerful, honest self-revelation that enabled her to draw into a closer relationship with her daughter.

Spiritual sexuality is a profound form of self-revelation and surrender. It might not be too dramatic to call it a confession of the body – a physical statement that says, in effect, "this is who I am, flawed physically as in every other way. Take me as I am.

To begin to talk about spiritual sexuality is the first step in that process of surrender and self-revelation. It is a step to be taken hand in hand with people who are committed to

knowing you. Honestly, is there another place in your life where you have a better chance to know those around you and be known by them?

May we awaken to the holy gift that is our sexuality.

May we not hide it under a bushel, but uncover it with reverence and gratitude.

AMEN.