Sexuality and Spiritual Growth

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To Lillian
and
John (in memoriam)

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Introduction

She has composed, so long, a self with which to welcome him,
Companion to his self for her, which she imagined
Two in a deep-founded sheltering, friend and dear friend[1]

Wallace Stevens

Sex is like going to the supermarket: lots of pushing and shoving and not much to show for it.

Shirley Valentine

This book has grown from the need, expressed by students and readers of *The Mardi Gras Syndrome* (Crossroad, 1984), for a more extended and experiential development of its premise: that human sexuality can function in human lives as a sacramental reality, that the spiritual significance of our sexual lives and the sexual significance of our spiritual lives need not remain a "forgotten" theological truth. Sexuality is integral to spiritual growth and depends on it. For many reasons, amnesia rather than *anamnesis*[2] has characterized theological thinking about sex. The interconnection, for good or ill, of bodily life with life in the Spirit, once celebrated ritually, was reduced by moralizing to an instrumental connection. Prior to the loss of an idea comes its neglect, the reducing of its value, usually not by an outright falsification, but by stating half a truth as the whole truth. The reductionism characteristic of mid-life disillusionment with sex is aptly expressed by Shirley Valentine's supermarket analogy. Everyone knows the analogy describes a fact of life. But everyone laughs because it is also perceived as only half the truth. What is problematic is that the half truth can be taken as the metaphysical reality for the person who has become disconnected from life, and whose physical expressions have consequently become "empty" symbols, mocking vitality and relationship that is no longer present. Such reductionism is the stuff of humor,

of course, and plays a salvational role in human life by showing us objectively, that is, in cartoonlike fashion, what our lives have become. Self-knowledge can precipitate the moment of crisis that helps us reject the caricature in favor of a fuller appreciation of the truth.

But when that reductionism has become uncritically identified with the reality itself; when the reductionism becomes the dogmatically proclaimed and accepted norm by which life itself, not just one stage in it is judged, then, this book will argue, there is no longer salvation (nor humor, nor fact) in it. There is only ideology. The ideology of sex which has been transmitted through church, family, and medical establishments has fractured eroticism from spiritual growth. But that was an ideology constructed to deal with the problems of a certain kind of society, one for whom the threat to its existence was perceived to come from excess of pleasure, from emotional attachments. That interpretation of what endangers human development can and has been deconstructed, to make room once again for a fresh insight into experience. Necessarily a new articulation of the relationship between sexuality and spirituality will have inadequacies, and will need also, eventually and in certain situations, to be ignored, criticized, or debunked. But no one who has ever lived through the unmasking of one ideology, taken uncritically as the truth about human life, will be quite as vulnerable to the absolutizing of another.

All of this is not just clearing the land to make room for a recovered memory, a "new" theory older than the traditional one; it is also a promise and a disclaimer. Theology considers all things in their relation to God. The object of the consideration, "all things," implies that the whole range of human experience is theologically significant, and therefore theological reflection is supremely, even some would say, foolishly confident. But by the addition of the qualifying phrases, "in relation to God," the theological project is also recognized as an enterprise that is consciously self-negating. God as ultimate mystery is not a fact to be mastered or used in instrumental fashion to illumine others. Things in their relationship to God are only known to be such by faith. But faith is a vision without a pointer; it needs words to communicate itself, and words are always inadequate, not just to the divine reality, but even to the finite insight into the Mystery that impels an individual to say what she sees.

Nonetheless, the intent of this book is to suggest a possible form that a theology of the relationship between spirituality and sexuality might take. It is obviously not meant as a "how to" exercise, neither for "spiritual" nor "sexual" athletes. Such manuals abound, but all of them I know proceed from the premise that a person works either at one or the other. Spiritual guides have written manuals of family spirituality, personal spirituality, liturgical spirituality, but not family sexuality, personal sexuality, or liturgical sexuality. Sex therapists and counselors have produced the joy of sex, sex without guilt, and

nouvelle sex, but none of these proceed on the assumption that there is a connection with Spirit.

For the all-important overturning of assumptions, a theoretical piece is needed: a theology of the relationship between sexuality and spirituality. Without dispensing with intellectual rigor, logical consistency, and the honesty and seriousness without which extended writing is impossible, theoretical reflection, when experimenting with the overturning of even very serious assumptions, can display a certain intellectual playfulness. One *entertains* ideas, to see what happens; one does not force them into service or order them out of the house if they can't fix things. There is a large element of "what if . . ." that can be frightening to people, especially in thinking about sex. Only the reflections, the social constructs about our sexual lives, are at stake in this book. People who fear that "once we start to think about it we will ruin it" apparently do not realize that we live in the ruins of previous thinking about sexuality. Like architectural ruins, it is good to keep our intellectual ruins around to sober and remind us, but we needn't live in them.

The reason for this book is obviously not to discover new facts within a disciplinary specialty. It is rather to suggest an integration of what is known from disparate fields. The process is basically that of turning data into knowledge by placing it in a new context. So it aims to synthesize, to surprise by unconventional juxtaposition, to look for new relationships between parts and the whole, to rethink past and future in relation to the present, and to suggest patterns of meaning that cannot be seen through the lenses of traditional disciplines.

The metaphor that dominates this essay is "Penelope's Robe," a reference to the garment that Penelope, resourceful woman in Homer's *Odyssey,* wove, unraveled, and rewove. The metaphor is not unproblematic, yet it was chosen for its multivalence. The tunic or robe is a Platonic convention for the body and bodiliness; the sexual is often referred to as the "seamy" side of life; the interweaving of the sexual and spiritual is a task seemingly often accomplished but apparently never completed. That which looks like gift at night becomes task again, especially in the clear light of morning. There is, as well, in the image of the garment woven during the day and unraveled each night to thwart social expectations, a kind of parable about the difficulty of connecting the inner and outer, the multiple and the sex-role-stereotyped self. As used here the image is not alleged to be responsible exegesis of Homer's text. Nor should the debate in freshman college classes about Penelope's deficiencies as a literal role model for the modern woman bias the reader against her use in the title of this book. My inspiration comes from the twentieth-century poet, not the ancient author of the *Odyssey.* In many ways the problem of sexuality and spirituality is Penelope's problem: How compose a self, an integral center, before one is

pressed into service as mate, mistress, or mother? In Wallace Stevens's poem, "The World as Meditation," Penelope is a composer, creating the world through mental exertion and reflection. Her inner life, imagination, composes both her perceiving self and the other, Ulysses, whose presence she desires. In an act of *anamnesis,* not amnesia, she feels the warmth of the sun ("interminable adventurer"!) on her face at daybreak, and the poet asks: "But was it Ulysses? Or was it only the warmth of the sun on her pillow?" And answers, "It was Ulysses and it was not. Yet they had met/Friend and dear friend and a planet's encouragement/The barbarous strength within her would never fail." So long as the thought keeps "beating in her like her heart," the possibility of connecting of inner and outer, vertical and horizontal, public and private, historical and natural, is present. The heart and the mind do beat together! A colleague who is a classics scholar informs me that Penelope's robe, in the original, was actually woven to be her shroud. Not even this connotation, it seems to me, robs it of its aptness as a symbol of the problem of connecting spirituality and sexuality in the midst of the complicated concreteness of life. Sex and death are interrelated, biologically as well as psychologically. Moreover, both are symbols of union, bringing about the dissolution of boundaries without, I believe, the loss of personal identity. A very great difference between sex and death is the religious construction of death as the ultimate gateway to union with God; sex in Judaeo-Christian culture has not been viewed so happily.

A prefatory word is required about the experiential source for these reflections. While my own experience is not without value, neither is it the source for the explorations in this book. I think as one who lives within the riches and limitations of my own life, but I neither reflect on my own personal experiences, nor take them to be in any way the "raw material" of my thinking about sexuality, nor the model for conclusions that would generalize about the connection between spirituality and sexuality. My experiences are reality checks: they critique and challenge the concepts that have been derived from a richer mix. The conceptual constructs out of which people live are not unidirectional: there is not a direct line from experience to thought (clear, certain) and back to (correct, controlled) experience. If there were, life would be both easier and worse. We could act directly out of our clearest thought (easier) but know that our thinking was no more than the rationalizing of our previous action (worse). Yet there is another reason for insisting on this by now obvious point: My experience is not paradigmatic for you, nor yours for me, nor should we look for another who can show us how to live sexually. This mistake—to assume the conceptual order can and should be instanced literally in the concrete order—has impeded adult moral development and constrained pastoral practice when it has been made.

How, then, does experience, much valued by existentialist, feminist, and

liberation theologians alike, figure in this book? Individuals' experiences (through narrative and anecdote) can help disclose the varieties of meaning assigned to human sexual expression. They can also attest to the dividends of happiness and fulfillment or pangs of regret and guilt that have, in individual lives, characterized certain actions and attitudes. As always, these personal documents must be used critically. I will take care not to move from one level of discourse to another, that is, from the conceptual model to the concrete example uncritically. While experience can lead to error, so can every other source of moral understanding, even a direct revelation of God, if it is misinterpreted. The most powerful critique of any ethical use of experience is accomplished by gathering more experience of greater diversity and comparing it with the interpretations already made. Christian thinking about sexuality was always influenced by experience, but most often it has been the experience of attempting to curb and train the sexual impulse within a celibate lifestyle.

The new thing, then, is not the appeal to experience but the two-way process of induction-deduction which is consciously employed. At times certain patterns and their consequences are recognized and illustrated by stories of experience. At other times values, directly disclosed to the individuals in their actions, challenge or reaffirm the traditional namings of value and disvalue. While the examples used are most often from women's experience, it is hoped that they will be of interest and that the theoretical framework employed here will be of use to men as well as women. When we name what we do according to theological categories of grace and sin, both the experiences and the categories are opened to transformation. My hope, in the words of Michel Foucault, is "to change something in the minds of people, . . . to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence, some themes which have been built up at a certain moment during history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed."[3]

I am greatly indebted to hundreds of adult students and workshop participants for autobiographical material that they have shared with me and in many cases permitted me to use in this process. Above all, life experience is honored by letting it be what it is: not reducing it by judgment to a category of acts, nor elevating it by arrogance to a norm. To preserve confidentiality, the passages are not directly identified; to acknowledge insight and courage, the authors are here gratefully acknowledged: Rose Mary Boyd, Linda Carey, Cara Lynn Carlson, Robert Cheshire, Irene Eiden, Debbie Eucker, Mary Jo Fortney, Kathleen Hook, Mary Ellen Johnston, Amy Kendall, Theresa Klinge, Doris Knettel, Cheryl Maloney, Judy Nelson, David Osberg, Colleen Riley, Julie Schmidt, Barbara Sheldon, Cynthia Tastad, Beth Tessman, and Kay Trottier.

In addition to the many supportive, encouraging, and challenging students, audiences, and colleagues, I am grateful to my family for ignoring my

critics, and to my critics for making it well-nigh impossible for me to stop thinking, talking, and writing about this topic. Finally, it has been a pleasure to be able to count on the superb judgment and consistent challenge that Justus George Lawler offered as mentor and editor in this effort to bring a project of "re-thinking" to some kind of closure. He is without peer in theological publishing, having sought for years to make voices of women audible to hearers beyond the closed circuit of classroom and workshop. Agreement and opposition come cheap as one tries to think the way through a seeming contradiction, but neither manifests the respect for ideas that is represented by this editor's ability to usher them into the arena of public discourse.

1

Real Sexuality and Other Concepts

Are we perhaps here, just for saying: House, Bridge, Fountain, Gate, Jug, Olive tree, Window.—possibly: Pillar, Tower? . . . But for saying them, remember, oh for such saying them, as never the things themselves hoped so intensely to be. Is not the secret purpose of this sly earth, in urging a pair of lovers, just to make everything leap with ecstasy in them?

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies* 9

Both terms, sexuality and spirituality, are ambiguous, not because there is no reality underlying these words, but because there is so much. And because they refer to personal relationships, not to existent objects, they are symbols carrying clusters of meanings. They are not univocal terms, like clitoris or penis, but multivocal or plurivocal terms, like body. This is founded in the complexity of the nature of human action itself, and should not be construed as a reason to avoid speaking about human action named from the points of view of bodily expression or of interpersonal (transcendent) relationship. A reductionist tendency might be identified with both dogmatism and skepticism. Dogmatism: "Why are you trying to make so much of sex; after all, it's just fucking." Skepticism: "Even if you find the spiritual in the sexual, so what? How can I know you didn't just put it there?" Precisely! These are the kind of realities which you won't find there if you don't put them there. Interpersonal reality, the sort of thing called meta-physical by Max Scheler, is not objective. It is intersubjective. We participate in making it what it is for us. Neither sexuality nor spirituality are things out there; they are names for us catching ourselves in the complex act of being human, of transcending the way of being of an object to recognize ourselves as subjects, centers of interdepen-

dent activity. I think that both words are resisted with good reason. To mean only coitus when talking about sex is to remain among a field of objects: the woman typically the object of the man; the man typically the object of the desire. To speak of sexuality is not to refer to an "out there," but an "in here," a capacity and faculty, a flexible, formidable way of expressing oneself in one's finitude as male or female. Intercourse, if the term could be reclaimed from the reductionists, suggests the inner, outer and inter-relation of persons. Similarly, to mean only the externals of institutional adherence when speaking of religion is to remain among a field of objects: the faithful as objects of the ministry and teaching; the clergy as instruments of the institution. But real sex includes sexuality, and real religion includes spirituality. Only by falling into reductionism, in the form of objectifying these terms as if they were separate metaphysical entities, have we seen clearly that the return to the point of view of the reflective subject is required.

SEXUALITY

It is essential at the outset to describe what is meant in these pages by bodiliness, so that the hypothesis regarding its connection with spirituality can be understood and tested. I both have and am a body. My body is "both an object for others and a subject for myself."[1] But this ambiguity, that body is capable of two interpretations, is not the same as ambivalence, that there are unresolved conflicts concerning it. Phenomenology has declared the traditional dichotomizing of mind and body as inadequate and inaccurate. So defined that they were seen in a negative relationship—as one was repressed, the other was assumed to thrive—it would be possible to define them so that they were assumed to be identical: your sexuality is your spirituality. But experience does not bear this out, and I do not want to replace a simplistic separation with a simplistic identification. Einstein is reputed to have said that we should try to make things as simple as possible, but not more simple. To affirm a relationship is useless unless it can serve understanding, to work for us to help us resolve conflicts and increase positive experiences. In two ways I hope to do this: first, by attempting not just to define the terms but to describe the human experiences which are their referents; second, to aim not to convince but to explore and to imagine. Proof is not sought, for it cannot be found in an investigation into interpersonal realities. This interpretation is meant to provide a catalyst for self-understanding. It points to examples, discloses values, and hopes to increase the bodily experiences of knowing and loving, of joy, peace, patience, and courage. To that extent these reflections will have been of value. Not the writer, then, but the reader applies the hermeneutical principle.

The dialectic between explanation and understanding, understanding and life traces the "hermeneutical circle" in theology, but according to Paul Ricoeur,[2] while remaining an insuperable structure of knowledge, when it is applied to human things it is not a "vicious circle." It opens out to the illumination of experience; it does not aim to produce a utopia.

In the interest of achieving at least a basic agreement on key terms, I describe as "sexuality" the entire range of feelings and behaviors which human beings have and use as embodied persons in the world, expressing relationship to themselves and others through look, touch, word, and action. It includes the combination of our gender (identity and role) and sex (anatomy and physiology) and is coextensive with personality. Sex, used as an abbreviated term to mean sexuality in this recovered humanistic context, means more than the connecting of organs in genital interaction which acts out natural impulse; it includes the subjective capacity for free and responsive expression of the person, always a bodily, gendered, morally significant response. While sexual vitality is observable in particular organs and their physiological response to stimuli, and is dependent on hormones and physical states, it is not reducible to the material or hormonal level. It is as much an expression of the mind and imagination, knowledge and memory as it is of the glands and muscles, though it is expressed in glands and muscles. Both more and less than genital contact, human sexuality encompasses intention, respect, and intimacy that go beyond and sometimes stop short of the act by which the woman's vagina contains the man's penis. "This is a much broader view than I had previously," wrote one woman. "I think I had very little definition around sexuality outside the sex act. There is a need simply to experience my body in new ways."

Awareness of sex and gender grows with our perception of ourselves and the ways we respond to the messages and expectations of others. When Elizabeth Taylor was quoted as saying, "My beauty is all I ever really had," she was identifying with a pattern, a self-image based on physical features and a sex-goddess stereotype. It is not surprising that, faced with the fact that her "beauty" is gone, she continued her sentence with, "My life is over." Sexuality is certainly mediated by the physical and in turn mediates the spiritual. Sex appeal is the word generally used to register if and how successfully a person's body mediates her sexual potential. Yet mediation is different from equation: physical features have something to do with the whole of life, but one should not be collapsed into the other. The sexual might be said to be in relation to the body somewhat as the mind is to the brain. Yet sexuality is not a function of my body, but larger than my body, a power of my person, as is my intelligence, my will, and my spirituality. Ms. Taylor did not say, "Its life is over," but "my life is over." She was inaccurate in reducing life to physical beauty, but profound in her perception that, once reduced, the reality would shrink to match the

perception. There is continuity and coherence, yet not identity between body, sexuality, and spirituality.

As inherent in individual persons, formed and defined within their cultures, human sexuality is not just one's own as subject; it has a history. It does not exist in perfect form in God's mind or will, but its perfection is to be an aspect of changing human persons in a diversity of changing cultures. In classical Greece, for example, some individuals would have been seen as not persons since they did not own (even though they possessed) their bodies. Moreover, they had no legal identity other than that derived from the owner whose property they were. Sexuality, thus, is claimed, as freedom is claimed, not given as are limbs and organs. A dynamic and changing sexuality belongs to culture, not nature. Its dysfunctions can be caused and cured, whether in the personal expression or in the social form, though they are not well understood, because not studied until recently. It is valued and feared and exists under an unwritten rule of silence and secrecy. To break that silence, even in one's own mind, is a fearful thing. This remains true even if Foucault's thesis is accepted, that is, that the past century has produced not liberation but greater control of sex through its constant pressure to confess, analyze, and subject bodily activity to scientific study. I would agree that once sexual feeling has been translated into discourse, it can be used to extract the information needed to control. But I do not see the return to secrecy or ignorance as a desirable way to avoid that dilemma. Expressiveness is also an effect (and purpose) of human discourse. If someone is unable to conceptualize aspects of himself apparent to others, he is more, not less, vulnerable to control by others who are more knowledgeable. Students routinely tell of the conflicts they undergo merely telling their parents and friends that they are taking a college course with the word *sexuality* in the title.

> I have learned throughout lecture and group discussions that sexuality can be discussed in a fun way. That we can laugh at silly puns; that sex, when discussed, does not have to be solemn and boring. Sex talk can be interesting, enlightening, and fun. That was really refreshing for me. I am so used to people being so uncomfortable when discussing it.

The fear appears to be that of acknowledging themselves as sexual subjects, legitimate heirs to a history of human wisdom regarding the confused desire they feel.

Heretofore the "history" of human sexuality, formally as an account of human becoming or informally as stories of personal pain and fulfillment, remains unwritten.[3] So long as this is the case, individuals feel isolated and

alone, each imagining herself odd and inadequate for a different set of reasons, while the idealized sexual existence remains unattainable.

> "I stayed in that marriage in a victim role," one woman wrote. Always being duped into thinking things would get better. His goal was to keep me satisfied sexually. That was our only means of communication. He did an outstanding performance on that score. Sex was the only real focus. Touch led to orgasm and magnificent mutual satisfaction, all in one breath, it seemed. And then I was left empty. There was talk, but no communication. There were decisions, but no mutuality, discussion or sense of equality. The sexual focus sucked the spirit out of me.

If the ideal attempts to overcome all desire with rationality, the ideal is unattainable; if it identifies satisfaction with being insatiable and multi-orgasmic, it is also unattainable. Either way the false ideal functions effectively as a source of guilt and victimization rather than as the common human symbol of connectedness and mature vitality.

Sex is good. At first sight the linking of these three words might appear to be the ultimate in naiveté or the useless restatement of the obvious, yet these three words need to be linked together in a theological context to counter an ancient amnesia. "And God saw that it was good . . ." is the recurring motif of the creation story.[4] God declared "good" the light, the earth and sea, the plants, fruits and seeds, and "every living creature that moves." God "blessed" them with reproductive capacity and said "let them multiply on the earth" (Gen. 1:21–22). God then created human being, male and female he created them, and blessed them as well so that they might "fill the earth and subdue it" (1:28). "And God saw everything . . . and, behold, it was very good" (1:31). From this version of the creation story there is no doubt and no ambivalence: the sexual potency of all earth creatures is in continuity with the creativity of the divine source of all being. It is "very good." But now, calling attention to that tradition in the context of later theological development, one appears to have to protest too much, to be open to challenges of naiveté. The burden of proof has been shifted by the version of the next story in Genesis—a story widely characterized as that of the "Fall" and dominant in the Judaeo-Christian de-valorization of sexuality. The second story has so associated male and female sexual awareness with the connotations of danger and sin that the other half of the truth, sexuality as mediation of life and love, has been deprived of a hearing. "Sex is good," says the Creator in the first story; "Objection" says the interpreter for the second; "Sustained," says the theological judgment of the authoritative church of the recent past. The difference between the first and

second story is not in being but in "knowing." Reflective sexuality is the blessing and curse of the second version: "And the Lord made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them, Then the Lord God said 'Behold, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. . .'—therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken" (3:21–24). The fruit of the tree of knowledge is ambivalence: one knows oneself as not only made but clothed by God. Now the gift has become task. Once outside the garden of direct vision, the woman and the man might remember that there is a tree of Life, but the religious voices they have internalized have declared an enmity between the holy and the human, between the sacred and the sexual, between the playful and the prayerful.

As many commentators have observed, the negative sexual attitudes associated with the Christian tradition are not required by the Genesis text; they evolved during the first four centuries of theologizing. They drew from—and departed from—pagan practices, Jewish tradition, and memories of Jesus. The desire for heroic virtue was expressed by Christians in their embracing of celibacy even as their predecessors had embraced martyrdom. They considered themselves the timeless "people of the resurrection" (Luke 20:36) who were not bound by the social structures represented by marriage. The tension between the heroic, prophetic forms of Christian living and the common, sacramental form has not yet been resolved, especially and most painfully with regard to the inescapable dependencies of food and sex. Was such dependency to be feared and fled or to be embraced and transformed? To be free of need and desire was the human ideal articulated by Jewish Essenes and Stoic philosophers. Since appetite grows even as it is fed, sex and food stood as a symbol of humiliation to those who defined being human as being beyond physical desire.

Elaine Pagels has shown convincingly that what was at stake in the early Christian articulation of its new anthropology was freedom. While some radicals among the early Christian thinkers interpreted the reason for the banishment of Adam and Eve as illicit sexual activity, the majority of commentators on the Scriptures viewed it as an act of disobedience, thus implying that human beings were created responsible for the choices they are able to make freely. Had Adam and Eve been merely rebuked like children, she argues, the impression would have been that they were unable to control the forces that took over in them. Human responsibility, not human corruptedness, is affirmed by the serious consequences described in the story. The assumption that freedom, rather than the disability consequent upon the Fall, was the point of the theology of creation is reflected also in Clement of Alexandria's claim that the equality of all persons created in God's image constituted a religious reason for rejecting the civic obligation to worship the emperor. For him and others,