

The Hunger FOR Ecstasy

Sacred sexuality honors pleasure as a gift from God.

SITTING WITH my friend Roseanne in the darkening twilight, I ask her a question I've been asking many people lately: "What does sacred sexuality mean to you?" Roseanne hesitates, searching for the right words. "It's not something you can force, but once in a while, you pass through into something beyond, something transcendent. It's like a great light.

Life comes pouring into existence, and for just a second, you get a chance to look at it and see it happening."

Roseanne, a mother and housewife in her early fifties, is neither a student of Tantra nor versed in new age thought. In fact, she seems an unlikely source of information on sacred sexuality: She was raised in a strict Mormon family where sex was equated with sin. Yet the long-overlooked truth is that countless men and women feel a natural, intuitive reverence for sex as the place where "life comes pouring into existence."

At the same time, millions of Americans also carry a heavy legacy of

sexual guilt and shame that blocks their ability to appreciate sex as a divine gift. Over and over, people tell me that their parents seldom or never talked about sex and pretended to be asexual. "In my family, there were no words for sexual parts or sexual acts," one woman said. "When I was eight or nine, I got out a mirror and looked at my vagina and wondered if there was something wrong with me. 'Is this OK?' I thought. 'Is this how it's supposed to be?'"

Many of us were raised in religious traditions that considered sex as "unspiritual," if not downright sinful. In contrast, most indigenous people revere

sex as an encounter with the spirit world. Sobonfu Somé, a teacher from the Dagara tribe in West Africa, says that her language has no words for "having sex." The equivalent Dagara phrase translates as "going on a journey together"—a journey guided, according to Dagara belief, by the spirits of the ancestors. Moreover, the Dagara believe that although this journey is taken in private, it benefits the entire community, because in the process, the human and the spirit worlds are brought into alignment.

Such ideas seem a far cry from our own. Yet I have heard hundreds of women, as well as many men, describing sex as a mysterious, profoundly sacred power. One woman, for example, responded without a moment's hesitation to my question about the nature of sex: "Sex is the light that streams from the body." Another said, "Sex is a field of magic." Still another told me, "It's the primal creative force. It moves through you, but it doesn't belong to

BY JALAJA BONHEIM



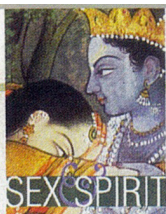
you. You can't possess it."

Sex is not a genital activity; in fact, it is not an activity at all, but rather an aspect of the creative life force, also known as *kundalini*, that can enliven and electrify us at every stage of life. For Cindy, a sculptor in her seventies, the moment of her sexual awakening at age 28 coincided with her birth as an artist. "In that moment, I understood that this vibrant aliveness was *me*. That's who I am. All the creative work I have done

since then comes out of that state." Cindy has had several deeply satisfying relationships, but today she is happily single. "I felt so empowered when I realized that I would always be a sexual woman and that I didn't have to depend on a partner," she told me. "The older I get, the more I feel turned on to spirit, to my own creativity, and most of all to the crazy, magical rush of life."

Naomi, a woman in her forties, made the exhilarating discovery of her own

sexual power during a women's ritual in which each participant took off her clothes and offered a nude dance. Years of childhood abuse had taught Naomi to equate sex with humiliation, so she began her dance shaking with terror. Soon, however, fear gave way to a mounting surge of ecstasy that intensified until it exploded into orgasm. "This joy started coursing through my body until I was rolling around on the floor like a little animal, kicking my legs



and laughing," she recalls.

Sacred sexuality can be ethereal and gentle, or it can be bawdy, raucous, and funny. Cutting through the ego's pre-tentiousness, it reconnects us with the innocent joy of our animal bodies and gives us the medicine of wild, liberating laughter. The ancient Greeks thought of Aphrodite—the goddess of love—as the "laughter-loving" goddess who was always surrounded by children.

We all need to find our way to ecstasy, for the soul's hunger for ecstasy is as real and urgent as the body's hunger for food. When people become obsessed with sex they are, in fact, starving for ecstasy. When they fail to acknowledge this, they may mistakenly try to satisfy that need through alcohol, drugs, or self-destructive sex. Modern Western civilization is probably the first that has no ecstatic rituals. Creating our own versions of the Sufi zikrs, the Pagan spring festivals, or the ancient Greek mysteries could address the longing that drug-prevention programs and sex education cannot fulfill.

As an energy that transports the soul back and forth between the unmanifest and the manifest dimensions, sex has always been of special interest to healers, shamans, priests, and priestesses. Today we are experiencing a mass spiritual awakening. More and more people are refusing to submit blindly to external religious authorities. Instead, they are examining religious teachings in the light of their own beliefs, hoping to separate the nourishing kernels of spiritual truth from the husks of outdated dogma. Often sexuality acts as the catalyst for forging a path through uncharted terrain. Richard, now happily partnered

with another gay man, was formerly a Zen Buddhist teacher and monk. "I saw desire as a big no-no," he told me. "The Buddha taught that attachment to impermanent objects causes suffering. In my order, that was interpreted as meaning that personal attachments were bad, and sex was definitely bad."

Like many religious institutions, Richard's order considered celibacy a spiritually superior way of life. In theory, Richard agreed. Yet, as the years went by, he became more and more frustrated. "I felt dry and shriveled. I started wondering, 'Where's the juice in my life? I need to find that juice.'" Soon after, Richard chose to leave his order, a decision he does not regret. "I believe that the purpose of the spiritual path is

not to avoid suffering but to grow in love," he says. "And the only way I can walk the path of love is by following my heart's deepest desire. I still feel that celibacy is a valid choice, but it should be an option, not an ideal. So much hypocrisy and deceit are the direct result of idealizing celibacy."

FOR CENTURIES THE WAY OF THE monk or nun was deemed incompatible with the "way of the householder." But the path of sacred relationship is as least as demanding as the monastic path, because it forces us to develop and transform the ego in ways monastic life does not. Nonetheless, Richard is not alone in his determination to integrate sexuality

PRACTICES

10 Steps to Sexual Wholeness

1. TELL YOUR STORY IN SACRED SPACE.

Telling your story is a powerful way of coming out of sexual isolation. Sometimes it can be a lifesaver. However, this deeply intimate process should always be contained in a sacred space, which might be a therapist's office or even a trusted friend's living room. I recommend telling your story in an environment in which it will be received with attention, compassion, and reverence, in which you will not be judged or shamed, and in which your confidentiality will be respected.

Like the body, the psyche has its "private parts," in which we hold our deepest, most intimate secrets, as well as our most vulnerable feelings, memories, hopes, and fears. Your story is sacred, and you would no more want to share it with an inappropriate audience than you would want to have sex with inappropriate partners.

2. EMBRACE PLEASURE AS A FRIEND.

Wilhelm Reich was one of the first psychoanalysts to realize how much we fear pleasure. When Joanna had an orgasm that left her, as she put it, "at the center of the universe, totally at one with every-

thing," she reacted not with elation but with terror. Often, we associate pleasure with decadence and sin, while viewing pain as virtuous. As one man put it, "In Catholic school, I learned that suffering was good. Jesus suffered, and so did the martyrs. Nobody went to heaven for having a good time."

Provided our pleasure does not harm ourselves or others, we should consider it healthy, healing, and holy. Sacred sexuality honors pleasure as a gift from God—nature's way of letting us know what is good for us. So, welcome pleasure into every moment of your life and embrace it as a teacher and friend.

3. FIND TIME AND SPACE TO OPEN TO YOUR SEXUALITY BY YOURSELF.

Masturbation—self-pleasuring—can be a voyage of self-discovery and an experience of truly making love to yourself. But there are many other ways to turn yourself on as well. Get naked, wrap a shawl around your hips, and do an erotic dance. On a warm summer night, go out and lie in the damp grass, letting your body commune with the earth. A good lover is a priceless gift, but don't think that without a lover you can't be sexual.

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and spirituality, human and divine love. Over the past fifty years, there has been a radical shift in the purpose of sexual relationships. More and more couples find themselves simultaneously committed to a spiritual journey, to inner transformation, and to each other. A married friend told me, "What people like us are trying to do has never been done before. Certainly our parents were not trying to achieve that level of honesty and consciousness and intimacy."

Marriage—or any long-term, committed sexual relationship—is perhaps the most radical voyage of personal transformation a spiritual seeker could embark on. Marriage involves saying yes—not only to another person but also to the difficult process of surrendering

one's deepest, most stubborn ego structures to the purifying fires of love. For this reason, the mythologist Joseph Campbell used to describe marriage as a form of crucifixion. But short sexual involvements, too, deserve to be honored as spiritual teachers. Every sexual attraction carries a message from the spirit; so-called sexual "chemistry" has its source in the hunger of the soul to reclaim its own wholeness.

This does not mean we should act on every impulse, however. One woman, Hannah, told me of a night she and a monk spent sharing a small room, both madly in lust with each other. "Neither of us slept a wink," she recalls. "Every cell in my body was trembling with desire, but I did nothing." Ironically, she remem-

bers this night as one of her deepest experiences of sexuality. "I don't believe that sex and love necessarily have to go together," she told me, "but in this case, they were in conflict, and I chose love."

Those wanting to improve the quality of their sex lives will find no lack of books, workshops, and teachers. But even the most refined sex techniques cannot unlock the door to the sacred. The key lies not in our actions but in our perceptions. To experience sex as a luminous miracle, we must approach it with eyes of reverence and with a mind free of judgment and shame. ●

For information on Bonheim's workshops, write: Meetings in Sacred Space, P.O. Box 9446, Berkeley CA 94709.

4. TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PARTNERS YOU ATTRACT.

If you have a history of choosing inappropriate partners, you can safely assume that in some way you still feel unworthy or undeserving of the love you want. Learn as much as possible about where and why you go astray. Watch for patterns of "making do," condoning abuse, or settling for relationships that are ultimately destructive and undermining. Sacred sex involves not only physical nakedness but also emotional and spiritual nakedness. Take a good hard look at who you are getting naked with.

5. LEARN TO EXPRESS YOUR SEXUAL DESIRES AND NEEDS.

Good sex requires honest communication. Don't expect your partner to read your mind. Unfortunately, fear and shame cause many otherwise articulate men and women to become mute in bed. Alexandra spent ten years in a sexually frustrating marriage before she finally found the courage to ask her husband for what she wanted. "As a good, red-blooded American girl, I was brought up to believe that the man had to give you sexual pleasure, and that if he didn't give it to you, there was no way to get it." As it turned out, he was more than happy to oblige her. Yet one wonders how many relationships fail because partners have been taught not to express their desires.

6. SLOW DOWN, SAVOR THE EXPERIENCE.

We all know that stress can destroy our health. It also cripples our sexuality. Slowing down—way down—is essential to sacred sexuality. Ecstatic lovemaking occurs only within sacred time, time out of time; it cannot tolerate being crammed into tight schedules. "Quickies" can be wonderful, but they are the sexual equivalent of fast food. Give yourself a gourmet meal now and then.

7. RELAX WHILE AROUSED.

When sexually aroused, we tend to tense up. We generally want to reach orgasm as quickly as possible, so we concentrate our excitement in the genital area. Often, we unconsciously hold our breath at the same time. Practice doing the opposite. Breathe deeply and relax into increasing levels of sexual arousal without rushing toward orgasm. If and when orgasm occurs, it will release a healing flood of pleasure throughout your entire body.

8. BE BRAVE.

Even with the best partner, sacred sex is bound to be somewhat scary. As in any encounter with the Divine, you will need to let go of control and surrender to a power greater than your own. Sacred sex is loving sex, and love is not for cowards; it takes courage to plunge into that purifying blaze. Yet the body

yearns to reconnect with the eternal source of its being and grieves when we become so fearful that we refuse the healing medicine of ecstatic pleasure.

9. OPEN TO GOD AS YOUR LOVER.

Meditate on a divine being who blesses your sexuality and desires you with as much passion as you desire Him or Her. Mystics of all spiritual traditions have invoked God as a lover who led them into states of rapture and orgasmic pleasure. By accepting God as your lover, you invite sacredness into your spiritual experience. On the other hand, opening to the divine lover will also transform your spiritual practice. In the presence of God the lover, worship becomes lovemaking, and lovemaking becomes worship.

10. TAKE THE NEXT STEP.

Ask yourself, "What is the next step in my sexual life?" It can mean telling your lover about your sexual fantasies, writing erotica, or choosing to be celibate. For one woman, taking the next step meant visiting a local sex shop. "I was scared," she remembers. "Decent people just don't do that kind of thing. Then I thought, 'OK, it's time for you to admit to the world that you are interested in sex.'" What's the next step for you?

—J. B.