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Thinking More Wholly and Holy about Sexuality

EDDIE PARISH

As a marriage and family therapist who also teaches about sexual issues, the most common thing I have noticed is people's mental conceptualization that sex is a purely physical act. People think about sex as biological, chemical and physiological, which it is. When students are asked if sexuality involves one's thinking, emotions, soul and spirit, they all answer affirmatively. Yet when pushed, most cannot give a solid answer to explain how. Furthermore, when people ask for assistance, they demonstrate the deeper beliefs behind what they are asking. "What should I do for . . . ?" often means, "Tell me what action or behavior I should practice or engage in to deal with this sexual concern." If an answer is given that deals with thinking differently about the issue, many balk at first and do not see the relevance. If discussion is held about praying and inviting God into the equation, many respond in a dismissive fashion. In reality, many married people have not thought deeply about the multiple realms that can be experienced in sex. Sex is physical, sex is spiritual, sex is emotional, sex is cognitive. In a marital union sex is wonderful, mysterious, rational and a means to the end of each individual maturing into the image of Christ while simultaneously the two become one flesh. Sex has the potential to be profoundly physical, spiritual, emotional and heady. But it does not happen automatically. One has to be intentionally mindful and grow in faith that God designed and created sex in a "whole" sense.

In a real sense, sex in a marital union provides a wonderful opportunity for a woman and a man to be physically naked. To have the actual lights on. To praise God for connection, warmth, friendship, eroticism and bodily pleasure. To address their fears, anxieties and body image worries. They can laugh, cry, get angry, be defensive and offer and receive grace and forgiveness. Being naked, physically and metaphorically, heightens the intensity in all human realms. I invite people to think more wholly about their sexuality in order to be more holy in their sexuality. In every sexual encounter each participant has many thoughts and beliefs, multiple emotions, spiritual energy and varied bodily responses, all in the relational context. One cannot have sex without all these realms being involved. Thus the sexual encounter in a committed monogamous relation provides an arena like no other for individuals to become one and to be transformed, maturing into the image of Christ—with the result being able to love with all their hearts, minds, bodies and souls.

BREAKING THE WHOLE INTO PARTS

In this section I will explore sexual desire, and then describe how thinking, emotions, spirituality and actions are all simultaneously combined. Sexual desire is greater than a thought or an urge to initiate sex; it also contains eroticism and passion. This is seen in the Shulamite in the Song of Songs (5.4–5) when she said, "My lover thrust his hand through the latch-opening; my heart began to pound for him. I arose to open for my lover, and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with flowing myrrh on the handles of the lock." Solomon expressed this desire in chapter 7.5–7 when he said, "Your stature is like that of the palm and your breasts like clusters of fruit. I said, I will climb the palm tree, I will take hold of its fruit. May your breasts be like the clusters of the vine, the fragrance of your breath like apples, and your mouth like the best wine."

These components of desire have been described as a primal energy that emanates from one's head and soul and is expressed in bodily ways.

Imagine a husband and wife at suppertime. The food is almost ready to be served. The table is being set by the kids. Discussion has been about the day of work and school, and then the husband goes up to his wife, hugs her from behind and says, "Thanks for all your work today, I appreciate you." He sneaks a kiss on her cheek, holds the hug a second longer than usual, and then?

Instantly the wife interprets these actions. She has thoughts and emotions. Her body responds, something moves in her soul. All of these arenas are triggered very quickly, so quickly it is hard to attend and notice. The content of the thoughts, emotions and responses are endless. Imagine her experiencing a quick bodily surge of eroticism. But just as quickly she has emotions of embarrassment and shyness. She thinks, "Not now," or "You only want one thing." Then she feels anger, and communicates very quickly with a look that says, "You are an insensitive jerk." The husband interprets the look, and instantly feels ashamed. He thinks he made a dumb move, then quickly blames her by thinking she is frigid and does not really care about his needs. From the moment of the initial kiss, this whole interaction took about ten seconds. The next moments of supper preparation and moving to the table are done in icy silence, each of their bodies containing the experience of their thoughts, emotions and the other's reactions. The kids notice a change of the atmosphere. The family emotional sphere is changed; they wonder what happened. The wife thinks all of this was caused by her husband's inappropriate kiss, with its bad timing and sexual content. The husband thinks all of this was because his wife is so uncaring and sexually repressed. Stop for a minute and remember that the purpose of this example is to show how thinking, spirituality, emotions and the body are all simultaneously involved. Do not get caught up in analyzing the rightness and wrongness of the responses of the man and woman. This is not what I am talking about right now.

The same scene—a husband and wife at suppertime. The food is almost ready to be served. The table is being set by the kids. Discussion has been about the day of work and school, and then the husband goes up to his wife, hugs her from behind and says, "Thanks for all your work today, I appreciate you." He sneaks a kiss on her cheek, holds the hug a second longer than usual, and then?

Instantly the wife interprets these actions, she has thoughts and emotions. Her body responds, something moves in her soul. All of these arenas are triggered very quickly, so quickly it is hard to attend and notice. Also, the content of the thoughts, emotions and responses are endless. Instead of receiving his embrace negatively, the woman experiences a bodily surge of eroticism and feels joy and excitement. She loves that bodily surge. A smile comes to her face, she thanks God in her mind for his creation of these bodily movements. She thinks, "I am glad my husband still finds me attractive." She hears the kids, looks over at them, and then turns and gives her husband a smile as she keeps on stirring the pot and preparing the meal. The husband interprets the look, has a surge of excitement, and feels happy and joyful. He offers a prayer of thanks for his and his wife's sexual desire and eroticism. God is praised in his mind. He gives his wife a loving glance; he turns and gets more dishes out to hand to the kids. From the moment of the initial kiss, this whole interaction took about ten seconds. The family emotional sphere is enhanced and uplifted and the kids wonder what happened. Joy and playfulness abound. Stop for a minute and remember that the purpose of this example is to show how thinking, spirituality, emotions and the body are all simultaneously involved. Do not get caught up in analyzing the rightness and wrongness of the responses of the man and woman. This is not what I am talking about right now.

Understand that sexual desire is more than a biological drive or urge; it is about one's beliefs about God and how he designed and made us, how we interpret the scriptures on sexual passion. Desire involves our emotions of guilt, shame, embarrassment, joy, excitement and pleasure. Desire involves our bodily responses in various situations and times. All of this is encompassed in a community of faith, with influence from our families and their modeling and teaching, and then played out with our spouse in the daily relational interaction with him or her.

SEXUAL UNION AS A PLACE TO MATURE AND BE FORMED MORE INTO THE IMAGE OF CHRIST

Imagining sex as a vehicle for maturing individuals is different and difficult for many people. When one is physically naked on top of the sheets with the lights on, there is the potential to uncover and enlighten many aspects of one's self. It provides an arena to explore one's anxious ways, to bring out worries of competence, adequacy, servitude and selfishness. When a spouse starts to demonstrate more raw passion like the Shulamite, one spouse may feel used or exploited while another feels loved, wanted, needed and secure. Experiencing raw passion can push one to think about one's erotic desire and wonder if it is of God or Satan. Did God really design me to be erotic or is this just lust run amok in the world? During sex, one can feel such intense joy that tears come and God is praised. Or, one may have tears of regret for past sexual immorality and can wrestle right there in bed with the issues of forgiveness, consequences and God's grace.

David Schnarch's book *Passionate Marriage*¹ has a chapter titled, "Nobody's ready for marriage, marriage makes you ready for marriage." Inherent in a committed monogamous union are all the elements for growing. Note that just because these elements are present does not mean growth will necessarily happen. In our will we can choose to bypass the hard areas. In our thoughts we can let them grow in the realms of blaming, rationalizing, defending and attacking. Emotionally we can allow feelings of woundedness, shame, guilt and inadequacies to reign. Bodily we neglect exercise, overeat and become slothful. Spiritually we can neglect our relationship with God and not eat good spiritual food. But, because of the nature of a committed monogamous relationship we can use the elements to grow up and be formed in the image of Christ. Let me describe the potential for growth with this example of a typical sexual interaction between a husband and wife.

Our couple has been married seven years and they have a three-year-old child. Dinner is over, the child is asleep and the wife has the desire for sex. Her husband is working on the computer. She is considering how to let him know she is interested. She considers going up to him and giving him a hug and kiss, but she remembers that he does not like to be bothered while on the computer. She thinks about stating her desires, but her husband has complained that when she initiates sex he feels "less than a man" because he believes a man should initiate. She considers dressing up in some lingerie and walking by him, but there are feelings of being demeaned and a little too "slutty." She finally chooses to interrupt his computer work and says simply she is interested in having sex with him. He hears her request but is caught up in his work. He wants to finish, so responds with a sigh and a tone that communicates he is bothered. She heads to the bedroom with sexual desire but also feels vulnerable about really being wanted. As she walks she thinks, "What is wrong with me? He used to jump at the chance for sex." She sighs with frustration and then feels anger welling up inside. As he finishes at the computer, the husband is no longer focused on his work. He wonders, "Why doesn't she listen and care about me since she knows I feel less than a man?" He does like sex with her, but not as much as he thought he would before marriage. It takes more effort and sometimes is not as exciting as he imagined. He starts thinking that she is the problem. But then he realizes that he used to be excited about sex all the time and wonders what is wrong with him? Is he just getting older? Are work and stress getting to him?

It is now four minutes later. Both are in bed and they start to kiss. As they kiss they start to explore each other, and then the husband stops. The wife feels him pulling back. Instantly she has several emotions and thoughts. Her body recoils. He noticed that while kissing, he was still thinking and feeling the same things he did while at the computer. Internally he is training to ask himself this one question that stems from the parable of the plank and speck: "What does it say about *me* that I feel or think this way?" He turns on his side, still looking at her and he begins to speak.

Stop for a minute and remember that the purpose of this example is to show how thinking, spirituality, emotions and the body are all simultaneously involved. More specifically, this vignette is a way to demonstrate that marriage has the potential of growing, maturing and transforming us into the image of

1. David Schnarch, *Passionate Marriage* (New York: Norton, 1997).

Christ so we love him and others with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. Do not get caught up analyzing the rightness and wrongness of the responses of the man and woman. This is not what I am talking about right now.

HOW MARRIAGE, AND MORE SPECIFICALLY, THE SEXUAL ARENA, GROW US UP

Since sexuality involves one's whole being, every aspect of self (thoughts, beliefs, emotions and soul) can be opened to the spouse while being naked in the physical light and the spiritual presence of God. If one views sexuality in this way it is more than a place for orgasmic release, but becomes an arena for the trials of knowing and being known. It is a wonderful arena for the journey of two becoming one in the Lord. In the sexual bed, one has the opportunity to receive touch and affection from his or her spouse and enjoy physical touch while feeling many emotions. One touch and kiss may influence feelings in one person of being cherished and cared for, while it brings up feelings of inadequacy or insecurity in another. If a person pays attention to what is going on inside of their head and body, he or she is able to disclose those aspects of self to the spouse when they are most vulnerable and susceptible to rejection and scorn. If one can disclose and risk to their spouse what they are feeling or thinking, and take responsibility for the response, one can start to mature, heal, and continue to become more whole as a human being. As David Schnarch states, "eventually intimacy ceases to be just a vehicle for closeness, validation or orgasmic release; it becomes the arena in which individuals confront the issues of integrity and cowardice."² One always has the choice to open up, share, pray and grow; one also has the choice to close up, get quiet and go into hiding. Sharing all of oneself with the spouse requires integrity and courage. These times are the trials of knowing and being known. The sexual arena, a highly emotional place, provides many such opportunities for transformation and maturing into the image of Christ.

In the middle of a sexual encounter, one spouse may be wrestling with thoughts of being taken advantage of or used. Even though the couple may be physically kissing and petting, minds may wander. The spouse that is thinking about being used starts to feel it in his or her body, and often starts to lose the sensual connection. The other spouse may notice and stop to ask what is going on in the other's head. This is a point of integrity. What will one say, and how will one say it? If he or she denies these thoughts or feelings, the other spouse is left to wonder what is wrong, perhaps believing that the spouse is lying (maybe lies have been told before). This time, the spouse decides to open up and share the internal battle that is manifesting itself in his or her body. The spouse can then either take it personally and attack or retaliate, or hold on to himself or herself and have the chance to respond in a more Christlike way, demonstrating empathy and compassion. The couple can stop the kissing, talk, share, pray and ask God to continue to help them mature. This is a very brief description of how marriage and sexuality can grow us up. What an opportunity for knowing and being known!

HOW DO YOU THINK DIFFERENTLY?

Be very intentional about bringing God more fully into the sexual arena. In will, heart and mind, one should make a decision to invite God more fully in all aspects of life and specifically into every dimension of sexuality.

Train yourself to ask this question: What does it say about me that I react, respond and feel this particular way? Discipline your mind to look at your feelings, thoughts and bodily responses as belonging to you and not caused by your spouse. When God confronted Adam and Eve, Adam's first reaction was to blame Eve, and Eve's first reaction was to blame the serpent. It takes a lot of training to look first and foremost at the plank in your own eye. Ask, "What does it say about *me*, that I am reacting, or feeling this way?"

Pay attention to the clues, data, and what you are experiencing in the presence of your spouse. As you notice yourself and what is going on, share this with your spouse and own your experiences. See this as a part of "being naked" mentally, emotionally and spiritually—just as you are physically naked. As you pay

2. David Schnarch, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible* (New York: Norton, 1991), 130-131.

attention to yourself, you may note insecurities and fears as you attempt to engage in a sexual behavior that is new for you. Share these emotions with your spouse and grow through them. Do not spend a lot of time hypothesizing or theorizing about why you have these feelings, but rather accept that they are present and grow to expose more of your whole self with your spouse.

Take responsibility for your own growth and well-being. Many people hope to have their spouses validate or reinforce their experiences. While this is nice and beneficial, it does not lead to long-term maturing into oneness with your spouse. What will be required of each person is to be and do what God would have them be and do, regardless of how a spouse responds or reacts. You are responsible to be and act like Christ. You risk, reach out, explore and love your spouse as an act of integrity in your covenantal relationship with God through Christ.

Sex is intense, pleasurable, and can bring up a lot of internal dialogue. But it is also funny, and it is important to laugh. Sometimes the different positions that are attempted or places of coming together can be quite hilarious! Stop and look at each other sometimes and just laugh. There may be things that, through laughter, both partners agree do not need to be tried again! "I can remember one time when . . ."—use your own imagination and laugh!

Be more focused in the sexual arena as a place for you to grow to trust and obey God in all things. You can mature in your heart to trust that God will never leave or forsake you, even as you feel very open and naked with your spouse. Ask God through Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit to mature you to be obedient in loving your spouse as Christ would, regardless of whether your spouse responds in kind.

I believe the sexual encounter in a committed monogamous relation provides an arena like no other for individuals to become one and to be matured into the image of Christ, with the result being able to love with all their hearts, minds, bodies and souls.

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