



Your Story
MATTERS
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Columnist

Sex, spirit and shame

Let's talk about sex. Let's talk about spirituality. Let's talk about shame. The interplay between the three are powerful, complex, and deserve honest discussion.

When we talk about the need to feel known, the freedom to be vulnerable, the drive to connect with and understand, to give and to receive, are we talking about sexuality or are we talking about spirituality? When we lie naked with another, versus baring our soul to a greater power, is the implied vulnerability and trust really so different? Could it be that sexuality is one of the most powerful means of expressing spirituality and that spirituality is a primary means of bringing meaning to sexuality?

Unfortunately, our society and in particular, popular culture and religious institutions do not always acknowledge, and many times deny, the implicit correlations between sexuality and spirituality. Sexuality and spirituality are too often in opposition to each other, rather than allowed to coexist and feed each other in the symbiotic relationship they ought to. This societally driven divorce allows too much room for tension, shame, hiding, and perversion.

Popular culture too often portrays sex as a physical transaction with the primary goal being pleasure versus intimacy. Thoughtfulness and respect can at times be lost as there may be a refusal or denial to acknowledge the meaning behind such vulnerability. Popular culture also generally prioritizes and favors the pleasure and pursuits of men versus women. By too often depicting sex as a masculine-driven, hedonistic venture, our society diminishes the value of true intimacy, which can so too fracture the connections to soul and spirit. A person can have a lot of sex with very little intimacy and despite so many physical interactions, it can be altogether lonely.

Religious institutions too often go too far in denouncing sexual expression or feelings of pleasure. The

emphasis on modesty can too often be married with shame as women and girls especially are made to feel that the universal urge to physically connect with somebody must be suppressed and unseen. Implied in this belief is the notion that suppression of sexuality is somehow associated with an exalted spiritual state and that pleasure is an impediment to devotion. Sadly, this has at times created a culture of hiding that only bolsters feelings of shame. Particular harm can come when persons of authority representing a faith or set of spiritual beliefs exploit their power and abuse another. Too often has this happened, too many stories where simultaneously the beauty of sexuality and spirituality are tarnished amid trauma.

Popular culture too often exalts the body's pleasure to the point of denying the spirit while religious institutions too often exalt the spirit to the point of denying the physical body. There can be severe consequences with both.

The majority of my clients are women and girls. Both popular culture and religious institutions historically also objectify the female body. Too often, whether a woman is wearing a string bikini or head-to-toe cloak, her virtue and desirability are still reduced to her external

appearance, and either the expression, or suppression of her sexuality. She may wrestle with modesty being associated with virtue while the display of her body is associated with desirability. When it comes to sexual expression, women and girls frequently feel damned if they do, damned if they don't. A woman's appearance should never be the sole gauge to measure either virtue or desirability. She is ultimately far more complex. I will celebrate the day when women universally are given room to be desirable, sexual, and yes, virtuous all together.

Too often our experience with sexuality and/or spirituality is fractured by trauma, abuse, or corruption, and we can be left struggling to truly connect, find intimacy, and meaning. In extremes, we might try to deny these needs or trivialize them. Trauma can be complex, and so too can be responses to trauma. Sexual trauma can cause some to isolate and withdraw

from physical intimacy, while others may seek some level of control or pleasure amid so much pain by allowing risky or dangerous situations to repeat themselves. Spiritual trauma can similarly lead to isolation, fear of closeness, mistrust, poor self-value, and lack of meaning. Sexual trauma and spiritual trauma may happen apart from one another, but the impact is very often bidirectional, and shame can encapsulate each.

Rather than trying so hard to buttress the unsustainable barrier of shame our society often wedges between spirituality and sexuality, perhaps we can do a better job of acknowledging the beauty that can come when they are allowed to coexist and support one another. By continuing to divide sexuality and spirituality we are doing ourselves (men and women) no favors, as we may feel pressure to fulfill unrealistic roles that leave too much room for judgement — against ourselves and others.

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