

SPIRITUAL PASSION AND COMPASSION IN LATE-LIFE SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

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In this age of Viagra and other hype about sexual performance, sex, as we grow older, is defined more and more as a disease. According to medical authorities and the media, we face two sexual choices in late life: 1) submit to pharmaceutical intervention, or 2) sink slowly into a sexless sunset. (Berman 2000). As a case in point, the other morning I received yet another e-mail advertisement proclaiming chemical relief for my dry vagina or my limp penis. "Click Here to Increase Your Sex Life!" it began. "For Women--Gives You Great Bone-Jarring, Earth-Moving, Climb the Ceiling, Technicolor Orgasms! For Men--You Will Get a Rock Hard Pump!"

What's wrong with this picture?

The emphasis on performance and pathology leaves out much of what is most important in sexual relationship, especially as we mature. For both women and men this includes not only body pleasure, but a broad spectrum of emotional and spiritual issues that some contemporary sexologists (e.g., Tiefer, 1991, Ogden, 1994, 1998a, 1999, 2000; Daniluk, 1998, Ellison, 2000, Francoeur, 2000) and late-life researchers (e.g., Brecher, 1984; Walker, 1985; Sheehy, 1991; Barbach, 1993; Voda, 1997; Friedan, 1999) assert are crucial to sexual satisfaction. These issues include desire, love, commitment, intimacy, self-esteem, and the transformative properties of sexual ecstasy.

To explore this spectrum of issues, I conducted a nationwide survey on sexuality and spirituality during 1997-1998. It drew 3810 respondents and 1465 letters, which places it among the largest of U.S. scientific sex surveys. Eighty-two percent of the respondents are women. Ages range from 18-86. Seven hundred sixty-two (20 percent) of the respondents are age 50 or older and 295 (21 percent) of the letters are from respondents age 50 or older.

One of the major findings of this survey is that sexual and spiritual experience become more integrated as respondents grow older. For instance, when asked: "Have you ever experienced God in a moment of sexual ecstasy?" fifty-eight percent of the respondents 60 and older answered "Yes," as compared with only 23 percent of respondents 30 and under. Another major finding is that integrating sexual and spiritual experience contributes to the overall personal and relational health of respondents, that is: acceptance and love, oneness with one's partner, intense inner vitality, energy, and security as distinct from boredom, deception, and distance. Moreover, the survey letters provide a compelling body of evidence that late-life sexual relationships involve much more than physical performance. This narrative material reveals that eroticism is embedded in the totality of relationship--with self, with partner, and even with divine presence. This observation challenges today's medical focus on the dysfunctions associated with late-life intercourse. Yet it is consonant with anthropological research on marriage (e.g. Gimbutas, 1989; Eisler, 1987, 1995) and with the relational theory of sexual satisfaction proposed by contemporary American feminist therapists (e.g. Jordan, 1987, 1991), and mind-body healers (e.g., Brennan, 1987, Bruyere, 1994).

Interestingly, survey responses reflect more gender convergences than differences. Both men and women indicate similar convictions that the essential ingredients of spiritual sex are love (almost 90 percent), commitment (about 65 percent), and safety (about 65 percent). Sharing deep feelings (more than 80 percent) is far and away the most important contributor to spiritual sex for both men and women. (In my 25 years of experience as a therapist, I have found that men yearn for love, warmth, and connectedness just as passionately as women do, but they tend to have more difficulty acknowledging it--as evidenced by how relatively few men responded to the survey). Men and women also indicate similar attitudes about some of the inhibitors of the sexuality-spirituality connection. Depression and abusive messages head the list. There were some gender differences: Women were more concerned about their looks and about partners who wanted only physical kicks. Men were more concerned about not having a partner and about growing older.

Emerging Themes

For purposes of this paper, I have chosen to examine survey letters of women and men over age 50. I include the 50-year-olds because of the rich cumulative power of their narratives about sexuality and spirituality. Three major themes emerge consistently across age categories. These are: 1) freedom from cultural constraints on sexual expression, 2) transformation of past sexual negativity, and 3) relational richness. I will focus on these themes one by one, noting decade-by-decade distinctions in language and imagery. Letters of respondents in their 70s and 80s (n=35) tend to stress love, commitment, and holiness. This is the only age group in which more of the letters are from men. Letters of respondents in their 60s (n=65) tend to stress acceptance and humor. Letters of respondents in their 50s (n=195) tend to use rich detail in their discussions of spiritual discovery and of recovery from sexual negatives, such as abuse.

Freedom from cultural constraints on sexual expression

Western culture has long imposed sexual norms such as heterosexuality and monogamy, along with sexual taboos against masturbation, homosexuality, extramarital sex, and behaviors other than intercourse, especially if they empower women (Allgeier & Allgeier, 1988; Angier, 1999). Media stereotypes of late life depict dirty (if dysfunctional) old men lusting after titilating (if brain-dead) sex kittens. They depict women beyond reproductive age as asexual, and therefore invisible. Actor Julie Harris sums up this notion trenchantly in a recent interview on National Public Radio (8/3/00): "After the age of fifty, we become women of glass. Men look right through us." Yet many of the survey narratives describe moving well beyond all of these cultural constraints. They speak instead of a sexual confidence and fullness of expression informed, rather than eroded, by many years of life experience.

The following excerpts are from a couple who state their age as "74 years young" and their occupation as "sexually active." She writes of sexual intimacy as a whole-person process, and he adds comments about masturbation and spiritual orgasm.

She writes:

For me, it is most important for a man to be tender, loving and considerate of the sacredness of the intimacy of lovemaking and see it as a whole process rather than as on-again, off-again situation and we have enjoyed many prolonged sessions. It is true that I have found greater inner fulfillment as well as improved health loving in this way. I feel a oneness with my husband and I find a wellspring of inner self discovery whenever we make love. Viewing the spiritual attitude of love allows a fuller orgasmic experience as well as far as I am concerned. The greatest beauties of life are at our fingertips!

He writes:

As a child I often saw into other dimensions, into that mist or spirit that was "greater than Man." I found in masturbation, not only an answer to galloping hormones, but a full release during the ejaculation of semen with every cell experiencing an ecstatic orgasm. I felt more connected to the oneness of life along with the feeling of being close to creation....The bottom line to this letter is that oneness in love is a prolonged time of at least 4 to 6 hours of foreplay, oral sex, (whatever pleases the other), culminating in spiritual orgasm simultaneously where for a sacred moment the bodies blend as one, and the face of creation is seen.

There is more that can be said and we are more than willing to be interviewed with the exposure of our names.

Submitted in dignity and respect for truth,

Elwood and Daria Babbitt

74-year-old couple writing of their long-term relationship

This retiree in his 60s writes of moving beyond the societal boundaries of monogamy:

My first sexual experience was on my wedding night which was fantastic. A love was created between us that has lasted through 5 children and 40+ years so that today we are closer than ever. However, contrary to our upbringing we came to believe in an open marriage not as exploitation but as sharing. We were able to overcome jealousy and possessiveness, maintain a very strong committment and share with a few others, most of whom did not view sexuality as we did. Sexuality is a way of knowing self and knowing another.

66-year-old retiree from Virginia writing of his 40-year marriage

This woman in her 50s writes of finding life beyond celibacy:

I spent 15 years as a celibate spiritual seeker because I believed the Roman Catholic church's teaching that it was the best and quickest path to union with God. I fell in love with another celibate and we discovered the sex-spirituality reality--thank God!

52-year-old spiritual director and energy healer

Transformation of past sexual negativity

Not all sexual relationships are positive (Dworkin 1974; Brownmiller, 1975; Bass and Davis, 1988). Many survey narratives reflect the guilt, shame, fear, and sexual paralysis that result from social and religious pressures, abuse and substance abuse. Yet almost all these narratives also reflect some kind of positive life-change. A 61-year-old psychotherapist, gang raped at age nine, writes of recovery from his own "extreme promiscuity and predatoriness age 16-50." A 51-year-old New Jersey woman writes of having discovered nature as an escape from childhood sexual abuse--and eventually becoming "able to experience the presence and joy of this union [with nature] in the union of marriage."

This minister in his 70s writes of liberation through loss:

I grew up in Free Methodism, guilty about my body and all sexual urges (including masturbation). Liberation began at college level and in the armed forces, and continued as I married and went on to graduate school. I lost my first wife in an auto accident, my second wife in divorce, and am now married to an old college flame--after over half a century of our separate lives, marriages, bereavement and children/grandchildren. We have good sex, manually stimulated.

75-year-old retired Methodist minister from California writing of re-discovered love

This man in his 60s discloses a similar transformation of sexual negativity:

As a child both religion and sexuality were associated with guilt. Now I associate both with freedom to explore my own feelings and those of my partner.

61-year-old administrator

This woman in her 50s details a saga of relational vicissitude, which ends in a triumph of hope:

When I was young, I lived in a house where no one kissed, hugged or touched. I never knew about sex, as it was "taboo." On my wedding day, my mother told me "It takes about 10-15 minutes. Just lie there and take whatever he does, after that you can take a shower." My uncle molested me when I was 13. My mother caught him in the act and banned him from the house. I was not allowed to talk about the experience.

My first husband taught me the pleasures of sex, and the first years of our marriage were beautiful. After he became addicted to drugs, however, he became abusive and our sexual life was a nightmare. Once he "sold" my "services" for a bag of H [heroin]. I was repeatedly sodomized and needed surgical repair. My second husband unfortunately became impotent for the last three years of our marriage before he died.

My third husband has been "heaven-sent". It has been with him that I've discovered that spirituality and sex need not be separated and that the core of each of us is the essence of the universe--love. When we come together physically, it's as if the Goddess and the God are there also. Although we've been together 6 years, we've never had an argument. Each time we make love it is total ecstasy spiritually, mentally and physically. For the first time in my life I understand the concept: "The two become one flesh." We also become one with the Great All, Love.

Physical love is the deepest expression of the creator we can experience on this plane of existence.

51-year-old housewife from Vancouver writing of her relationship with her third husband

Relational richness

With age, sexual relationship can be enriched by memory, increased spiritual awareness, and long-term knowledge of one's self and one's partner (Faderman, 1981; Walker, 1985; Bonheim, 1997). A 70-year-old lesbian, widowed and with cancer, writes of "the

togetherness of sharing love...the closeness of sharing body and soul with my partner." A 74-year-old retiree adds the dimension of relationship with the divine: "There is an overwhelming presence of a higher-power energy during the sharing of our love."

This woman in her late 70s writes of experiences--and memories--that defy multiple physical challenges:

Fulfilled sex is like whip cream on a cake. It's the extra touch that makes life more beautiful. My husband had cancer of the bladder and both bladder and prostate were removed--We have our memories of past sex and we have the experiences of now--both are revered.

77-year-old woman with diabetes writing of her 33-year marriage

This woman in her 60s writes of an essential connection between sex and spirit:

My partner and I have been together for 20 years, more or less. Our sex life has only become better, in terms of intensity and our ability to give without limits, as we age. We've always been open and accepting. One thing about him has always excited me - he gives himself wholly and is never threatened by the vulnerability we experience when we make love unrestrainedly, nor is he intimidated by me being open to him. In fact, he loves it when I push him down and "take all his goodies." We feel that the important thing has been that we each loved and accepted the other and find no need for physical or behavioral changes.

I believe that in some way our souls have connected in a manner that we are at a loss to explain. I know that when we make love, there is a spiritual joining that enhances the sex. I'm not the most beautiful woman ever and he is not the most handsome man in the world. But, I'm his woman and he's my man. Our love is solid and complete and our sex life is like no other.

66-year-old Catholic retiree, writing of her 20-year relationship

This woman in her 50s graphically describes the presence of spirit as a distinctly physical emanation.

The love of my husband during sex just grew and grew with each intercourse until the actual hairs on his body sparkled. He became so beautiful and has remained that way.

51-year-old woman from California writing of her long-term marriage

Discussion

It is important to note that these survey respondents were self-selected and not part of a random sample (1098 responses came from independent distribution, 1285 responses from publication of the survey in *New Age* magazine, January, 1998 and 1427 responses from publication in *New Woman* magazine, July, 1998). Therefore, their observations are not generalizable to all men and all women. Consensus is, however, that the total sample of almost 4000 is large enough to determine a high degree of interest in the subject, and that the narratives are detailed enough to add to current understandings of late-life sexuality.

This said, what do the narratives quoted above tell us about possibilities for late-life sexual relationships? First, that sex is more than penis-vagina intercourse. Survey respondents describe many dimensions of sexual motivation and interaction that involve intellectual, emotional, and relational as well as physical activity. Perhaps most telling, they seldom use the language of body parts, physical arousal, and possession usually associated with sex, and often use language of connection, oneness, and transcendence usually associated with spirituality and religion. The next message of these narratives is that it is possible to move beyond dependency on cultural definitions of what sex ought to--or ought not to--look like in late life. Stereotypes about asexual (or dysfunctional) senior citizens no longer hold true when definitions of "sex" and "sexually active" are broadened to include the whole person in relationship to self, other, and spirit. Narratives bear out survey findings that sexual responses grow more spiritually integrated with maturity, and that integrating sexuality and spirituality implies personal and relational health. These observations are far from the routine pathologizing of sex for post-menopausal women and post-coital men. Finally, these narratives maintain that the complexities of sexual relationship are one's own responsibility. Nobody else can fix them. Pharmaceutical aids may have their place, but they are not everything. These products are designed to prolong mechanical ability for sexual intercourse, but not the capacity for sexual desire and satisfaction or for vital erotic relationship over the long term, certainly neither passion nor compassion.

In conclusion, a new, positive conversation is needed about late-life sexual relationship, with language that reflects the whole person.

Current medical and moral definitions of sexual normality leave out much of what is normal for many late-life relationships. When emotional and spiritual experience is factored in, an optimistic picture emerges. The narrative themes above affirm that sexual vitality does not necessarily lessen in the golden years. It changes, but it may actually become richer and more complex with freedom from cultural constraints and transformation of past sexual negativity. These themes suggest that maintaining a healthy and vigorous sexuality requires attention to more than the physical changes and challenges that occur with age. Self-esteem, caring, empathy, love, humor, and enthusiasm for life all play major roles in all aspects of sexual response. Creating an atmosphere of physical and emotional safety is crucial to many survey respondents. These, along with the ability to openly communicate feelings and listen profoundly to one another may be as potent a prescription for sexual longevity as hormone replacement therapy and Viagra.

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