



THE  
FIRE  
AND THE  
ROSE

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The Wedding of Spirituality and Sexuality

BUD HARRIS, Ph.D.



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We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well  
When the tongues of flame are in-folded  
Into the crowned knot of fire  
And the fire and the rose are one.

—T. S. ELIOT, *FOUR QUARTETS*, "LITTLE  
GIDDING"

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## Chapter 2

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### SEXUALITY'S PAST

Traditions are the guideposts driven deep into our subconscious minds.  
The most powerful ones are those we can't even describe,  
aren't even aware of.

—ELLEN GOODMAN, TURNING POINTS

#### *Understanding the Past*

On the opening page of *Look Homeward, Angel*, Thomas Wolfe reminds us of the importance of our history as he writes:

Each of us is all the sums he has not counted: subtract us into nakedness and night again, and you shall see begin in Crete four thousand years ago the love that ended yesterday in Texas.

The seed of our destruction will blossom in the desert, the alexin of our cure grows by a mountain rock, and our lives are haunted by a Georgia slattern, because a London cutpurse went unhung. Each moment is the fruit of forty thousand years. The minute-winning days, like flies, buzz home to death, and every moment is a window on all time.

The history and lore of primitive societies contained the sacred traditions and symbols that supported those societies' spiritual

principles. Experiences with nature, including human nature, that inspired either awe or dread were usually symbolized in terms of what today we might call "sacred." Thunder and storms indicated the presence of a powerful god. The fertility of nature was necessary to life and personified as gods or goddesses so powerful that they often required human sacrifices. The sun, vital to existence, was also symbolized by various gods. The journey of human life itself was outlined as a ritual path.

Sacred symbolism helped contain the numinosity of these awe-inspiring experiences and allowed people to attribute meaning to them. Another experience that has been symbolically related to many diverse phenomena throughout the centuries—from the fertility of the earth to the creation of the cosmos—is that of human sexuality.

Many of us may remember that some of the most emotionally charged memories of our lives cluster around sexuality. The first date, the first kiss, the first sexual experience, marriage, and the birth of a child—these moments have numinous qualities. So does the darker side of sexuality—being caught playing doctor by critical parents, being shamed for childhood exploring, sexual abuse, rape, or infidelity. This darker side can wound our souls, casting a gloominess on our personalities that may last for years.

I remember a moment in my early adolescence that I consider both numinous and sacred. It came when my parents decided to speak with me about love and sex. They talked with me separately and neither one of them sugarcoated their words with technical terms or religious clichés. My father spoke about how difficult it was to be a young man driven almost crazy by hormones, desperate for release and feeling the danger of having one's best intentions overwhelmed. As he talked I sat staring at him dumbly, finally realizing that he knew how I felt. He quietly shared that he loved my mother and believed that having a family was the most fulfilling way of life for him, but that it might not be for everyone. He cautioned me by explaining that intensity wasn't the same as love, and that a moment of forgetfulness could thrust a young man into a situation of lifelong responsibility and painful choices long before he was prepared.

My mother, who had by this time already had her first bout with cancer, also talked about love. She recalled the story of how she had met my father, their growing attraction to each other and the love that followed. She disclosed how eagerly they had wanted children and added that while she didn't know much about how boys felt, she considered love and sex to be sacred activities.

Their heartfelt advice was seared into my psyche. Their words became guiding principles for my longings as a young man. Without mentioning right or wrong, sin, guilt or religion, they simply shared their values. By doing so they gave me signposts to guide my way and put sexuality into a loving, spiritual context that provided meaning.

As I entered adulthood, however, I resonated so well with the love and sexuality of Celestial Aphrodite that I had rejected the earthier, more sensual version of Aphrodite Pandemos. For example, when I simply wanted sex to be fun, explosive or a release, I was haunted by my parents' words. Later on in my life, when I was finally in a truly loving relationship, I found it difficult to be relaxed and expressive in sexual matters. I had to work to rediscover the values of Aphrodite Pandemos and learn how to enjoy sensuality for its own sake.

Primitives were instructed in how to handle sexual desire by the wise old men and women, the shamans and ritual elders. These special people blended their extensive personal experience of life with certain intuitive insights that produced a wisdom and consciousness beyond ordinary perceptions of the everyday world. They became evolutionary pathfinders who set the standards for their culture. In their hands, the symbols and forms of sexuality were endowed with reverence. Sexuality was recognized as a biological urge that transcended human control, while at the same time it operated *within* humanity . . . binding, protecting and renewing the species. Therefore, sexuality was sacred, both radiant and ominous. As a corollary, both marriage and childbirth were also considered sacred—and their own spiritual forms.

The eruption of sexuality during puberty ends childhood by ushering in a revolution in our personality. It calls for the birth of our adult identity and for emotional separation from our parents.

The ritual forms for this transition in primitive cultures were hallowed, and as we have neglected to continue and update these forms, we have abandoned our children to their biology. And we have abandoned ourselves, for the emergence of sexuality and the concurrent changes in our body usher in an awareness of our initiation into the pilgrimage of life.

Without an acknowledgment of this transition, many of us remain ignorant of the spiritual purpose and power our bodies now hold. Sacred rituals connect us to life and become expressions of our soul. Thus, when we reduce sexuality and reproduction to mere physical functions and thereby rob them of their mythos, we violate something within us that is more profound, precious and sacred than we imagine. We run the risk of creating “soul wounds.” For example, a client working with me who had been married and divorced and through several lovers dreamed one night that she was standing before a huge painting of a man and woman making love. The picture was beautiful and had obviously been painted by a great artist. Slowly, she took a butcher knife out of her purse and began to slash the picture.

When she finished speaking, I asked her what she thought of her dream. What had it represented for her? What did this powerful act of destruction mean? She replied with tears in her eyes. “This is what I’ve done to my own sexuality. People in the dream were crying out in horror. Something in me is crying out, telling me to stop the destruction. I threw out the old shoulds and oughts because they just made me feel guilty. I felt I had the right to express and enjoy myself. But I’m not enjoying myself and I may be ruining something very dear.”

When we lose touch with the spirit and mysteries of life, we often replace them with religious or conventional rules—the “shoulds” and “oughts” the client spoke of, rules that offer little in terms of how to relate with the depth of our souls. Once again we forget that life is more profound than our practical busy world acknowledges; we take the easy way out and abandon our responsibility to teach, guide and inform ourselves and our children. This is unfortunate when our society’s institutions take this opportunity



to slip their points of view into our collective character to fill these gaps. We often don't even realize the influence of messages coming from the media, advertising, schools, temples and churches. When we unconsciously allow sexuality and reproduction to be taken over by social institutions, we abandon not only their spiritual dimension but also what is most essentially human within ourselves.

My parents gave me a foundation for making sexuality sacred in a very personal way. They did this by sharing honestly and clearly their heartfelt thoughts and feelings about the subject. Talking to me in this way is something I would consider a sacred activity, because my parents, who cared about me, took seriously their responsibility to instruct me in how to meet the future, and believed that sexuality was important, had put careful thought and preparation into our discussions. Without a value structure that supports and guides these great forces that live through us, we may find ourselves like a ship at sea without a rudder.

Our overemphasis on science and technology during the last century has led us to secularize sexuality and reproduction, making them more a matter of technique and hygiene than a matter of soul. While of course beneficial in many ways, this approach has also reduced sexuality to recreation and lifestyle. Ironically, we are culturally obsessed with intimacy and relationships. Daily I see people in my office who think they have a right to pursue an active, aggressive sex life but who are simultaneously confused by how lonely and empty they feel. They have engaged in frenetic sexual encounters in a mistaken search for the understanding and value of a true relationship. So just as the growth of rationalism, science and technology has not set us free, neither has the "sexual revolution." Instead, many of us are more confused than ever, and in pain and chaos.

As we watch the decay of the social forms that once carried the sanctity of sexuality, our *individual* task is to restore that sanctity to our own lives. (This is the task the woman awakening from the dream of slashing the picture realized she was facing.) When we do so, we will realize that the sacred is part of the structure of human consciousness.

## THE FIRE AND THE ROSE

Both Jungian psychology and the Western mystical development offer us a way to approach this task. But both approaches require that we reach back into ourselves and our heritage—the rituals, wisdom and spiritual practices of older cultures—in order to bring into the present the important concerns of the soul we have neglected. Understanding our past helps us understand our nature and becomes a foundation for the future.