

Still Listening

New Horizons
in Spiritual Direction



edited by Norvene Vest

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As spiritual directors, we ourselves are formed by many influences, not least of which is God's ongoing call to us to unfold in holiness. Yet no matter what other factors come into play, each of us is introduced to life with Mystery by our parents. During preparation of this book, four of the contributors walked alongside parents in the spiritual work of dying. We dedicate this book to all our parents and especially to them:

E. JANE DRISKILL,
mother of Joseph D. Driskill

EARL REED, SR.,
father of Juan Reed

GEORGE B. RUFFING,
father of Janet Ruffing

CARROLL WIGGINS,
father to Rich Rossiter's partner Perry Wiggins

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Norvene Vest

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Chapter Twelve

“FLESH IS MORE THAN FLESH”: SEXUALITY AND SPIRITUALITY IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Janet K. Ruffing, R.S.M.

*One winter night, Benedict's sister, Scholastica,
was awakened by a song bird. How can this be, she
thought, and she looked out the window of her cell.
Three naked men were dancing in the monastery
garden by the light of the moon. One whistled like a
bird and made her laugh. The men were fair to look
at, Scholastica thought, but she knew she needed
more rest before the first prayers of the day.*

*Kneeling by her bed, she closed her eyes and sleepily
said a prayer for the men—if they were men—that
they might find shelter, clothing, and rest for their
dancing feet,
and if (as she suspected) they were demons,
that they might return to from whence they came.*

*When she awoke, her cell was filled with the scent of
roses. Where the men had been dancing a rose bush
had sprung up and was blooming in the snow. It
bloomed all that winter, and it blooms to this day.¹*

This is a lovely, ambiguous story of a wise monastic woman who could hear the songbird of sexuality and laugh without having to repress either its wildness or its strangeness. Like all good discernment, she prayerfully waited to discover more about it so that the rose bush could bloom to this very day. I would hope that as spiritual directors our directees would find such openness when matters explicitly related to sexuality and spirituality become part of their spiritual direction, as they most certainly will.

In order to help us reflect on the relationship between sexuality and spirituality in our practice of spiritual direction, this essay sketches a general theological, anthropological, and cultural framework.

PERSONAL EMBODIED SPIRITS

It seems to me that we might describe ourselves as “personal, embodied spirits.” This anthropological assumption ought to condition how we relate our sexuality to our spirituality. As sexual persons, which all of us are, our sexuality always has a profoundly personal quality. It is never pure instinct, although there is much about our sexual experience that is rooted in mysterious survival. Because we inhabit our world in different embodiments according to gender and sex, our sexuality is always framed by our personhood, marked by our ability to choose how and when and in what ways we will express our desires in relationship with another, with ourselves, and with God.

As human persons, we are embodied. Our spirits do not exist without the graceful companionship of our bodies. It is in and through our bodies that we know and experience ourselves, the natural world, social life, and interpersonal knowing and loving. This temple of our bodies houses all of our spiritual experience, in which our spirit meets the Spirit and other people’s spirits. Our bodies are the sacraments of our presence; this is the only way we have of presenting ourselves. Our spirits manifest themselves in and through our sensuousness and our sexuality.

I think that James Nelson’s definitions are helpful here:

By spirituality I mean not only the conscious religious disciplines and practices through which human beings relate to God, but more inclusively the whole style and meaning of our relationship to that which we perceive as of ultimate worth and power. This includes disciplines and practices, but also myths, symbols, and rituals, informal as well as formal. It includes the affective as well as the cognitive. Significantly, spirituality includes the ways in which our relatedness to the ultimate affects our understandings and feelings of relatedness to everyone and everything else.

By sexuality I mean not only physiological arousal and genital activity, but also much more. While human sexuality is not the whole of our personhood, it is a basic dimension of that personhood. While it does not determine all thought, feeling, and action, it does permeate and affect all of these. Sexuality is our way of being in the world as female or male persons. It involves our appropriation of characteristics socially defined as feminine or masculine. It includes our affectional-sexual orientation toward those of the opposite and/or same sex. It is our attitudes toward ourselves and others as body-selves. It is our capacity for sensuousness. It is all of this.

The intimate relation between sexuality and spirituality is evident if one believes, as I do, that sexuality is both a symbol and a means of communication and communion. The mystery of sexuality is the mystery of the human need to reach out for the physical and spiritual embrace of others. Sexuality thus expresses God’s intention that people find authentic humanness not in isolation but in relationship. In sum, sexuality always involves much more than what we do with our genitals. More fundamentally, it is who we are as body-selves who experience the emotional, cognitive, physical, and spiritual need for intimate communion, both creaturely and divine.²

GRACE IN THE SENSES

If we draw on another often poorly understood theme within Christian tradition, our sexuality is one of the ways through which we experience that particular “grace in the senses” that we signify by the term *incarnation*. God becomes flesh that we that touch the holy in and through our senses.

Sometimes, I think women know this grace in the senses more intimately and pervasively than men because our sexuality, “by its very nature,

is a total sensory experience, involving the whole body (not just the genitals). . . . A woman does not even need a partner or a significant one-to-one relationship to be in touch with her sexuality.”³ Many women describe these total sensory experiences as sensual or ecstatic rather than “sexual” because women’s bodies are programmed at the cellular level to respond to such grace in our senses. “Sexual energy is the life-force (Eros) that permeates all of creation and is part of the joyfulness of creation.”⁴ Because some of us do not associate this rich sensuality with “sexuality”—when taken in its more limited sense as exclusively genital—some women may not explicitly connect such experiences with sexuality at all.

Contemporary women nature poets with a mystical bent evoke this diffuse sexuality and sensuality as it rises in consciousness in response to nature and to one’s own inspired incarnation. Mary Oliver and Pattiann Rogers offer excellent examples in their poetry.

I find it common in retreat direction that God literally makes love to us in and through our sensuousness in response to the beauty and even terror of creation. It is equally common in my experience that directees describe these experiences without conscious reference to sexuality, because these are usually experiences that happen alone, without specific genital stimulation.

Yet these responses lead us to another neglected theme in theological anthropology—the ecstatic characteristic of human persons. Whenever we love another, we are literally an ecstasis, a standing outside of ourselves. Human beings are made for such relationship, for such self-transcendence, for repeatedly feeling drawn beyond ourselves in both our human and divine loving. This human capacity for ecstasy is a normal part of ourselves. We all know that ecstatic sensual experience can be very spiritual. We experience uplifting ecstatic energy in music, in art, in worship, in intense feelings of love, in creativity, in sport, play, and dance, in communion with nature, as well as in our attractions and passions with human or divine lovers. As we all know as spiritual directors, some persons experience intensely erotic, ecstatic energy in their mystical experiences as well.

As spiritual directors, we have no choice but to engage this sexual core in our religious experience and that of our directees. We need to be alert to the ways in which explicit sexual themes and more diffuse sensual-sexual energies and passions emerge in directees’ experience.

In my premise that we are personal embodied spirits, I imply as well an important relational aspect to our sexuality. Our sexuality is the instinc-

tual root of our movement toward others. We learn, helpfully or unhelpfully, from our families of origin how we are to express our sexual selves, or to contain or repress them. We unconsciously assimilate from them how we dare to feel about these powerful energies. Our first bodily experiences of nurture are patterned usually by our parental experience. So, too, psychologically are our images for God. Here I want to connect our early attitudes toward our body-selves, which originate in our families, and our images of God. They often get mixed up with one another.

Repressive family or religious contexts do not help us to become comfortable with, familiar with, and accepting of our sexuality, regardless of our orientations. If we are gay, bisexual, or lesbian, we implicitly receive negative and shame-inducing judgments and feelings about our sexuality before we even know clearly what our orientation might be. Repressive approaches to any form of sexuality do not help us learn much about ourselves, nor do they teach us how to adopt spiritual practices that can educate and transform these desires, which we ourselves do not even quite understand.

The psychological characteristics of our sexuality will always have both conscious and unconscious aspects. If Freud has taught us nothing else, he has taught us that sex is almost never only sex, but often a complex symbol for many other things. As spiritual directors we need to be open to the symbolic meanings that sexual behaviors, desires, and images may have within the context of the particular histories of the people who share their sacred stories with us.

LOVE AT THE CORE

The human drive toward self-transcendence in a religion that places divine and human love at the core suggests that our passion, our eros as well as our agape, is ultimately directed toward God. If we do not follow the meanderings of these sometimes wayward and misplaced desires, we also cannot discover whence they originate and whither they lead. Without nonjudgmental attentiveness to these complex and confusing desires, we cannot discover what, as human lovers and companions, each person requires in order to discover the love at the heart of the universe and the life-force that propels us toward it.

This passion is the energy that wise directors enable their directees to endure, suffer, contain, explore, express, surrender to, respect, and reverence. Believe me, we will suffer with them as they struggle. Passion and authentic love cannot ultimately be controlled and still be love. Something

about these experiences is mysterious. “They are about infatuation and longing, courtship and poetry, passion and friendship.”⁵

PARTICIPATION IN MYSTERY

In other words, sexual experience in all its forms—bodily longing, sexual fantasies, relationships which begin in infatuation, response to arousal, and simple offers of loving friendship—are among the core human experiences that participate in surpassing Mystery. These experiences present openings into the Sacred Beloved at the heart of the universe, regardless of our sexual orientations or the choices we or our directees make about forms of sexual expression.

In many cultures of the world, religious traditions treat sexuality as one access to the Sacred. Prior to our technological, scientific, and psychological age, sexuality symbolized life itself. The power to bring human life into the world was a wondrous mystery—one to be revered, respected, and even worshiped. Sexuality itself was sacred. The twin mysteries of human existence—life and death—bring us face to face with the divine. Who originates this life in which we participate? Who ends this life of ours or of our beloved’s at some moment in time? Primordially in human experience, the life force biologically and instinctively part of our creaturely existence brings us face to face with the even larger Mystery “in whom we live and move and have our very being.”

At the same time, passionate love—our erotic attractions toward another—remains both mysterious and fearsome. We encounter this mysterious quality when we surrender to that love—whether in romantic pursuit of another or in response to one who desires us—or welcome its arrival in other ways. Both the joy and ecstasy of self-transcendence may occur in sexual union, in the delight related to childbirth, and in the demands of nurturing young life. Passionate love can also be blind, like a fire moving rapidly across the terrain, leaving destruction in its path. Our love and passion are not always ordered, not always enlightened, not always self-giving and mutually respecting. We often don’t know what we are doing. The dangerous aspect of sexuality is no less mysterious than the ecstatic and loving aspects.

Sexuality in its erotic playfulness and passion is inherently mysterious, participating in the deeper Mystery of God’s own life for women and men who live in a context of faith and love for God. Paul Ricoeur captures something of this mystery in human sexual love:

Ultimately, when two beings embrace, they don’t know what they are doing, they don’t know what they want, they don’t know what they are looking for, they don’t know what they are finding. What is the meaning of this desire which drives them toward each other? Is it the desire of pleasure? Yes, certainly. But this is a poor response, for at the same time we feel that pleasure does not contain its own meaning. That it is [symbolic]. But of what?

We have the vivid and yet obscure feeling that sex participates in a network of powers whose cosmic harmonies are forgotten but not abolished; that life is much more than life—that is, much more than the struggle against death, or delaying the time when the debt must be paid; that life is unique, universal, everything in everyone, and that sexual joy makes us participate in this mystery. . . .⁶

Church teaching recognizes that this mystery “is bound up in the mystery and purpose of God, who is the author of all life, and love itself.”⁷ It is participation in co-creativity with God, who made us sexual in the first place. God, too, must somehow be passionate and delight in spousal joy. God must somehow be at the root of our desire and longing and want to fill us full of Divine life and love. For the vast majority, marriage or other form of committed partnering is a path of salvation and transformation. Love begets love.

Because sexuality at its core is the “mystery of the human need to reach out for the physical and spiritual embrace of others,” our familial relationships and friendships become a school of love. The drive toward sexual union is the source of creativity both biologically and in other ways that serve the common good. Stability of relationship can foster profound growth into love that is faithful in season and out of season. Such relationships, through the joys and challenges of shared life, can serve as crucibles of transformation into greater love. Church teaching has been clear

that “the one core universal vocation is to love and be loved.”⁸ Faithfulness to love becomes revelatory of God. We learn to love, to embody, express, be love in our world as an intrinsic aspect of Christian vocation.

This experience of and desire for love is what James Thurber and E. B. White call “the strange bewilderment which overtakes one person on account of another person.”⁹ This strange bewilderment is almost always as much about what we mean by God as about human love. We need to feel this bewilderment, because we only become truly ourselves by allowing ourselves to be “carried away”—this is what I referred to above as our ecstatic nature. When we say yes to these experiences, desirous of love, we often discover that there we can abide in God, and God abide in us.

TASK OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS

How attuned are we as spiritual directors to receive such revelations from our directees? Only if we are comfortable with the sexual and spiritual and truly appreciate the confusing, troubled, guilt-ridden, intense, ecstatic, deceptive, revelatory, fluid, tender, joyful, powerful, and intimate quality of these stories can we help. Through our embodied and sensitive responses we can slowly help our directees integrate their sexuality and spirituality, both in human relationship and in prayer, when prayer takes the form of complex erotic imagery related to God’s intimacy with them.

As I described elsewhere,¹⁰ this comfort is not easily presupposed among spiritual directors shaped by a religious tradition that has variously construed the relationship between sexuality and spirituality. On the one hand, we have consistently taught and defended the goodness of our created world, which includes sexuality and sexual love. We have taught that we as sexual beings are made in the image of God and so partake mysteriously in God’s love. We understand the nature of the triune God to be love, which was expressed in God’s becoming fully human—incarnate in flesh in Jesus who gifts us with the indwelling Spirit. On the other hand, Christian tradition remains deeply ambivalent about sexuality. For much of our history, we have privileged sexual abstinence as an ascetical means of pursuing holiness, while neglecting forms of asceticism appropriate to sexually bonded relationships as an equally valid path of holiness. We have clearer teaching about sexual morality and sexual sinfulness than we do about sexual holiness, sexuality in the service of love, and sexuality as a privileged locus of ecstatic and mystical experience. We have dignified marriage with its own sacrament. Yet in much of our public discourse and

practice, we fail to recognize the primordial sacramentality of all forms of bodily loving. Such sacramentality occurs in the following ways: through interpersonal presence and communion; through the myriad ways of “touching” one another in life-affirming and creative ways; and through all the concrete actions of nurture and care required by our bodily existence. In the mystical tradition, we have reserved spousal symbolism for the purely spiritual domain and neglected the mystical potential of marital sexuality.

Most of us experience anxiety in the face of sexual or mystical experience that appears to deviate from standard heterosexual norms or that conflicts with public church teaching on reproductive issues. We and our directees are programmed more for anxiety than for appreciation—more for controlling sexuality (even in imagined prayer or fantasy) than for wondering about how love is trying to express itself or how God is trying to break through in profound mystery of erotic love and desire. Our response to directees will either open them to further exploration and integration or shut them down. Directees look to us for a safe “holding environment”—a safe place where they can risk voicing and responding to strange solicitations by God in perplexing experiences.

Were we more familiar with the gender-bending and fluid gender identifications of the Christian mystical tradition, we would discover that mystics, regardless of their gender, sexual orientations, or genital behaviors, use a great variety of erotic metaphors to describe their increasing intimacy with God. For instance, women mystics like Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Ávila relate to Jesus as a mother breast-feeding her child, or as a lover nourished by the breasts of the beloved in ecstatic joy and pleasure, receiving divine milk at the same time. Men in the medieval period might have related to Mary as a lover, or, like Francis, espoused Lady Poverty—powerful feminine images of the Divine for heterosexual men. Others related to Sophia—the feminine personification of God from the Book of Proverbs that is now being appropriated by both men and women as a contemporary mixed-gender image for Jesus. There is a long homosexual tradition, especially in religious art, which portrays John as a homosexual in relationship to Jesus.

What I am trying to evoke is a sensibility that our sexuality and our spirituality are deeply interwoven with one another. Our erotic experiences of human lovers as well as our non-genitalized loving relationships become templates of our imagery for God as the divine beloved. In a sense, as goes our sexuality, so goes our spirituality.

This acknowledgment can be extremely confusing and even embarrassing for directees should that imaging take unconventional forms. Some directees are completely unfamiliar with the tradition of love mysticism and become disturbed if their prayer becomes eroticized. In some Christian circles, sexuality lives so far from God that directees cannot even imagine that God or Jesus might express love in a sexualized form. For others, homoerotic imagery in prayer can be profoundly disturbing. For some directees, this may be the first indication that they are, in fact, gay, lesbian, or bisexual; they may not yet be ready to welcome this reality into their lives. Many heterosexual directees may be shocked when imagery for God contradicts their ordinary sense of themselves and their sexuality. They may be unaware that such imagery may be transient and not uncommon. For directees with little exposure to any real spiritual tradition, dream images or prayer images of a sexual nature may be a covert symbol for spiritual desire. For directees who have long been engaged in spiritual life, the emergence of the sexual may be an invitation to integrate these energies in more conscious and explicit ways. One Kundalini teacher I know asserts that spiritual energy is exactly one octave higher than sexual energy. People who have emphasized spiritual energy without integrating sexual energy may become involved with a partner who is more sexual than spiritual, and vice versa. John of the Cross teaches us to expect an upsurge of sexual energy in the aggression in the *Dark Night of the Senses*; such emergence is typically a midlife phenomenon today.

As directors, we need to attend to our own sexual energies, fantasies, and desires as they emerge in both our prayer and relationships, so that we do not bring unnecessary anxiety or discomfort to our directees. This is a fruitful area in which to work with our own spiritual directors, so that we are not thrown off balance by highly charged material our directees need the freedom and safety to explore.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES

I have discussed some aspects of church culture that may make this a difficult area for directors themselves to gain their own spiritual right relationship to this area of their lives. Yet we also are embedded in and unconsciously influenced by a secular culture that offers tremendous challenge. Cultural definitions of body and sexuality are pervasive, often pornographic and exploitative. Despite our allegiance to gender equality, women continue to be exploited sexually, abused, raped, commodified, and defined by standards of beauty or desirability that lead to anorexia, self-loathing, and disrespect.

Neither are men excluded from such treatment. Body image, sexual conquest, the severance of sexuality from relationships, confusion between love and power, sexual forms of domination, and abuse of power continue to be glorified in the media. Young people by the age of ten, or earlier, have often experimented sexually, and reach young adulthood with a series of unintegrated sexual experiences that leave them confused about sexuality, boundaries, and relationships. Directees of all ages have been shaped by the popular culture of film, television, and pop psychology—poor models for relationships. As a result, many of us are obsessed by sexuality in some form and search for instant intimacy in an individualistic quest to assuage our loneliness. Even technology leads us to relational misunderstandings. The Internet is a new location for sexual predation and inadequate forms of intimacy. This technology, although extremely helpful in some ways, disembodies our relationships. Hours spent at a keyboard or clicking a mouse create greater isolation and decrease the social skills needed to develop healthy face-to-face relationships. Virtual relationships can now supplant real ones.

REFLECTIONS FOR SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS

As spiritual directors we need to ask deeper questions. We need to question our own assumptions and beliefs and ask ourselves and our directees: What might be happening here? Where is this passion or desire leading? Do we have the balance and patience to follow the desire into places of incredible light and incredible confusion? By what are we seduced? In what ways are our directees deceived? In what ways might they be our teachers, making us aware of ways of living and loving we might never know? Do we hold healthy images of embodied loving for all who constitute the Christian community—gays and lesbians, married and unmarried, partnered and unpartnered? How do we experience God revealing God's self to each of them through their unique personalities and lives? How do we deal with the hypocrisy that is displayed in the media and press about political and religious leaders whose sexuality is abusive, exploitative, or contrary to what they profess it publicly to be? Are we open to a broad range of sexual experiences, without being overly moralistic or overly protective? Are we discerning enough to recognize when referral for dysfunctional or self-destructive sexual behavior is appropriate, while staying with our directees in their sacred place with God? Do we believe that all desire can lead to God, if we can help our directees discern among their desires?

If we can remember, as Pattiann Rogers reminds us, that "there's more to flesh than flesh," we might be able to do so.

Maybe it's the pattern of the shattering
 sea-moon so inherent to each body
 that makes each more than merely body.
 Maybe it's the way the blood possesses
 the pitch and fall of blooming grasses
 in a wind that makes the prairie
 of the heart greater than its boundaries.
 Maybe it's god's breath swelling
 in the breast and limbs, like a sky
 at dawn, that gives bright bone
 the holiness of a rising sun.
 There's more to flesh than flesh.¹¹

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