

Body and Spirit – The Severed Connection **February 4, 2007**

Larry: "As a rule, it was the pleasure-haters who became unjust."

W. H. Auden

Sandy: "The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything."

Julian of Norwich

Larry: "And then God said, "Let us make human-kind. Let us make them in our image, and so male and female, God created them. God saw everything that God had made and, behold, it was very good." *Genesis 1:31*

Sandy – When I was about 11 years old, my parents gave me a book to read, which was a bit of a surprise. I was an avid reader, checking piles of books out of the library. On vacations and trips, my parents often chided me for reading too much. So here they were giving me a book. I soon realized that this book was to be my introduction to sex. The book was titled Twixt Twelve and Twenty and written by Pat Boone. For those of you unfamiliar with the social politics of that time, Pat Boone was the clean cut, upright, non-gyrating alternative to the "Rock 'N Roll is the devil's heartbeat," Elvis Presley. Needless to say, the book was interesting, but not very helpful.

When I was in high school, my church youth group had a series of sessions on sex, led by our senior pastor, who focused on values and attitudes about sex. He did a good job, but he wore his clerical collar for the entire series. The sex question my girlfriends and I giggled about most was whether our pastor wore his clerical collar to bed.

In my senior year of college, I participated in a six-week group for engaged couples, led by our college chaplain. I still remember the lively and excellent discussions we had about the meaning of sexuality in a committed relationship. And later on, thanks to several women's spirituality courses I took at Pacific School of Religion, the whole link between spirituality and sexuality became very clear for me.

Larry – I may be able to top Sandy's book. My mother told me that she had put a book on the shelf I could read if I wanted to understand what was happening with girls. I really didn't know what she was talking about nor did I care very much about what was going on for girls.

But then a question came up. During summers at the farm, it was slim pickings for reading material, and in desperation I started reading my mother and sisters' women's magazines, like "Seventeen." A certain advertisement, with a photo of a woman in a one-piece bathing suit diving into a pool, claimed that with their product you could "Dive Right In." This was very confusing to me, and I couldn't find any explanation of what a woman needed to "dive right into the pool." I wondered if it was some kind of breast protector. So I hunted down that other book my mother had stuck on the shelf, produced by "Modess" which rhymed with "Oh Yes." It explained women's monthly cycles with phrases such

as "At certain times of the month you may not feel like climbing Pike's Peak, but don't worry, some people never do." That was my sex education from home.

The senior pastor from my church and a local doctor did sex education for our junior high youth group. We were each invited to write questions on pieces of paper and pass them forward. I watched the pastor and the doctor look at the questions my friends and I wrote, crumple them up, and go on to other topics. Oh, and the church's gift to each of us as we were confirmed was a copy of Pat Boone's book, Twixt Twelve and Twenty.

Eventually my high school church youth group did a wonderful program on sexuality, dating, and decision making, and I, of course, was also in the college chaplain's class with Sandy. Those were good places to talk.

Sandy – Given our backgrounds, both of us believe that it is important to consider the connections between sexuality and spirituality. Andy introduced this worship theme last week with a wonderful new look at the Garden of Eden story. Today, we're exploring the severed connection between the body and the soul. How did Christianity, the church, and our culture inherit such a confused message about sexuality? How can we rebuild some connections between sexuality and spirituality? Next week we will look more specifically about how we own and use our sexuality in ways that affirm our spirituality journey.

Let's be clear that when we are considering sexuality, we include all sexual orientations in this discussion. The values, images, and blessings we share apply whether it is for same gendered or opposite gendered relationships.

In our time and culture, discussions of sexuality and spirituality generally go in two directions. Moving one way, we want to rid ourselves of puritanical guilt trips that separate body and spirit. Moving the other way, we fear the use of sex for exploitation, as we currently see in virtually every public medium. And then, we rattle incessantly back and forth between these two directions.

Larry - It would seem that in most of Christianity's history the body and soul were enemies (*Daniel Helminiak, "Sex as a Spiritual Exercise" Yale Divinity School Reflections, Spring 2006*). This conflicted relationship did not come from Christianity's roots in Jewish heritage. Judaism has and continues to this day to celebrate sexuality. The ritual of Sabbath prohibits work, driving, television, computers and the like as it emphasizes the sensual: eating, resting, walking, and appreciating the beauty of the earth. Indeed the Talmud tractate states that the righteous couple should make love on the Sabbath night (which is perhaps why Jews are more motivated to keep Sabbath than Christians). *from Sabbath, by Wayne Muller.*

In the Bible, the book - Song of Solomon - celebrates sexuality as a beautiful part of life. Some consider it a counterpoint to the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Listen to Chapter 4:1-7

How beautiful are you, my love, how very beautiful!

Your eyes are doves behind your veil.

Your hair is like a flock of goats moving down the slopes of Gilead...

Your lips are like a crimson thread, and your mouth is lovely.

*Your cheeks are like halves of a pomegranate behind your veil.
Your neck is like the tower of David...
Your two breasts are like two fawns, twins of a gazelle that feed among the lilies.*

Sandy – Also from Song of Solomon, Chapter 5: 10-16:

*My beloved is all radiant and ruddy;
His hair is the finest gold, his locks are wavy,
His eyes are like doves, beside springs of water.
His cheeks are like beds of spices, yielding fragrance.
His lips are lilies; his arms are rounded gold, set with jewels.
His body is ivory work; his legs are alabaster columns.
His speech is most sweet, and he is altogether desirable.
This is my beloved and my friend, O Daughters of Jerusalem/*

Larry - The split between body and spirit didn't come from the teachings of Jesus either. The only thing Jesus says about sex has to do with adultery, and a certain kind of sexual obsession known as lusting in the heart.

There are those who even believe that Paul doesn't always deserve the bad rap he gets about sex. We'll get back to him later.

Sandy - When monotheism replaced the poly-theistic religions of goddesses and gods, there were two areas which monotheism did not adequately address: gender relationships and sexuality. This left a vacuum in these two arenas into which seeped and then poured Greek and Gnostic dualism, which separates the body from the soul. The soul is seen as spiritual and the body as earthly. And the patriarchal counterpoint was not far behind, that male is essentially different from and superior to female.

Larry - Christianity was haunted by the ghost of dualism from Greek thought, which was quite suspicious of pleasure. They believed that the only good sex was for having children. Any other use was mistaken, and the concept of mistaken soon turned into sin. In the eighth century, St. Augustine believed that rational thinking was the crowning glory of humanity, and since one tended to lose all reason in the midst of sex, he believed that sex was sinful except when necessary to produce children.

Historically, one could understand a wariness about sex. Before the advent of modern medicine, as many as 25% of all women died in childbirth. There was no effective means of contraception. Sexually transmitted diseases had no treatment or cure. Sex was not only thought to be, it actually was in certain ways, dangerous.

Sandy - As Christianity grew and spread, with this concept of sex as sinful, there evolved in the medieval Mediterranean church only three roles for a woman: virgin, mother or prostitute. From there, the Catholic Church developed celibacy as the ideal of spiritual practice. We can see the lasting threads of this conflict between sexuality and spirituality in our splintered culture today where millions of American tax dollars get spent promoting sexual abstinence as a means of birth control, not only in this country but around the globe, while at the same

time millions of dollars are spent by the media and entertainment industry promoting round the clock endlessly available sex.

Even now, churches simply shy away from dealing vigorously with sexuality because sexuality is seen as incidental or inappropriate or divisive to what churches call "the life of the spirit." To reclaim the link between body and spirit, to integrate sexuality and spirituality, we need to define for ourselves the criteria that make something holy. What then is holy spirituality? What then is holy sexuality? Where do these two overlap?

Larry: Think of how the gospel of John begins. As our call to worship points out, "The Word" (which means the whole creative spirit of the universe) became not a book, a theological doctrine, nor a moral code. To the everlasting embarrassment of all who think body and spirit are separate, the word became "...flesh full of grace and truth." Incarnation proclaims that the most basic and decisive experience of God comes not in abstract doctrine or mystical otherworldly experiences, but in flesh. That flesh is warm blooded, living human flesh; it is physical, touchable, sexual, says theologian James Nelson (*Embracing the Erotic: The Church's Unfinished Sexual Revolution.*) This means that we meet God in and through our senses: eating, sleeping, waking, enjoying youth and age, and glorying in the joys of sexuality.

Sandy – If we are made in God's image, then what does the body teach us about God? It shows us that God is all about acceptance, diversity, stillness, pain, and cycles of life and death. The freedom to experience joy and sorrow, love and loss, goose bumps of pleasure and aches of discomfort are all mirrors of what it is like to be holy like God.

One of the things I love about European Renaissance art is its joyful celebration of the body. I don't think you could grow up as a child in France and not be aware of the full male and female human body. Anatomically correct and beautiful statues and paintings are everywhere. In Renaissance art, the draping robes were pulled back, even from the body of Jesus, to reveal full sexual beings. The Calvinist wing of the Protestant Reformation, and the French Revolution, stripped the European cathedrals bare of all paintings, statues, and symbols, partially because of the tendency to turn such displays into idols, and partially because this art was also very sensual.

Of course, we have had our own recent puritanical revolution in this country as U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft covered the breasts of the statue of Lady Justice at the US Supreme Court. You can see how easily we mess up the beauty of human life and of the body. That puritanical and narrow-minded fear of sex is certainly part of what fuels the fear and hostility toward homosexuality as well.

The Florida Congressman who made sexual overtures to a teenage congressional page, the Colorado head of the evangelical Christian coalition who shared drugs and sex with a male prostitute, and the coach, teacher, and youth pastor at a Lake City Christian school accused this week of sexual misconduct with a 17 year old female student all have the common bond of denying their

sexuality and keeping it separate from their spirituality until it exploded in the most destructive and exploitive ways.

Larry: So here we are, many years down the road from learning about sexuality from the feminine hygiene products book my mother stashed on the shelf for me and from Pat Boone. We still fear the exploitation of sex and the harm it can do to both men and women of any age. Much of that fear – and much of the behavior of exploitation - still comes from the ways we separate our spirituality and sexuality.

If we truly believe body and soul are linked, then we can be much more confident about celebrating our sensual experiences with one another in a positive, healthy way.

Take the apostle Paul. *1 Corinthians 6: 15, 19-20* – *"Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, a temple which you have from God? So glorify God with your body."*

Yes, the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. What a relief! How good that is. Akira, a 3rd century Rabbi said, "We will have to account to God for all the good things our eyes beheld but which we refused to enjoy."

Driving home from California at the end of our first sabbatical, when our sons were eight and eleven, we had one of those long drives through the open spaces of Wyoming where it was very hard to find a place to stay. We finally got to a seriously used motel. Our room had HBO, something we hadn't seen before. Our boys came out from their showers, and there on TV was the film "Tarzan," rated PG. That movie includes a beautiful scene where Bo Derek emerges from the beach pretty much naked. Both boys' eyes opened quite wide. Chris said, "I guess we have to turn this off." Sandy, to her everlasting credit said, "No, she's a very beautiful woman, and it's a joy to see her."

Sandy: That joy - without exploitation, coercion, violence, or humiliation - is an experience of the connection between body and soul. It's linked with the joy of the body as a temple of the holy spirit. Let's try holding body and soul together again as a spiritual experience.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once commented that we have been taught that our bodies are fragments of the universe, pieces detached from the rest and handed over for us to inhabit. We must learn instead that the body is the very universality of things. My body is not part of the universe that I possess totally – my body is the totality of the universe that I possess partially. Whatever your religious background, the beauty of your sexuality is clearly a gift from on high, a portal we experience that transports us to timeless realms where the very pulse of the universe is palpable. (*World Words*).

And that is where we will pick up next week!

Please join me in prayer –
Holy One, You who are beyond and within all sacred names, we breathe in your presence and your light.

We lift up moments in our lives where we were taught or where we experienced the separation of body and soul. We pray for the healing of that connection in our thoughts and our actions.

We lift up moments in our lives where we saw or heard or understood or experienced the connection of body and soul. We pray in gratitude for that awareness, for those moments.

In the week ahead, open our eyes and ears, we pray, open our touch and our hearts, to all the beauty and color and scents and wonder of your world. And open us to an appreciation of our own bodies as the incarnation of your spirit of life – and to honor one another, in all our colors and shapes, blossoms and scars, as reflections of the uniqueness of your Creation.

And for the part of us that most needs healing in this moment, we pray in silence, held in your grace. Amen.