

Afterthought to “Sex, Sin and Salvation”

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At the *Gathering the Threads Conference* in January 1998, I presented a paper entitled *Sex,¹ Sin and Salvation: seeking a Spirituality of Sexuality*. Two years later I find myself often wrestling with this topic. Where do we begin to gather thoughts towards a spirituality of sexual activity? Do we begin - as I probed in my doctoral thesis - at the bodily pleasure of women to achieve equal partnership in the physical expression of sex? Or is our point of entry the pursuit of emotional, relational, spiritual intimacy which creates a sexual desire not only for passing pleasure but for a commitment to encounter the other's spiritual identity, the other's image of God? Like the rhetorical puzzle of what comes first, the chicken or the egg, these two aspects move in a circle, each contributing to the other.

So often I wish that I could focus on a subject - more distant, more ascetic, less embarrassing, less personal. Yet, in my lifetime as a woman of the church, we have moved from sexual repression to the sexual freedom of the generation of my children...without, I claim, any significant spirituality of sexual activity. In this situation, I hear the words of a poem written by a girl on the eve of her seventeenth birthday - about to leave school, in the fullness of sexual maturity, facing issues of independence, career and relationships:

¹ Some feminist theologians, such as Carter Heyward (1989:3) and Rita Nakashima Brock (1988: 40) reject use of the word *sex*, speaking rather of *sexuality* as extending beyond specific actions to the broader concept of our relational response as bodies to erotic/sacred power. While I agree with this position, I use the word *sex* in this paper as the activity surrounding intercourse.

Clarity can find no place in my mind.
Amongst the rubble of discarded identity, there are no answers.
Expression can find no vehicle in which to ascertain the truth.
Confusion plagues my conscience so that
 the way before me seems to crumble at my every step.
Fact and fiction stretch me in opposite directions -
They laugh without remorse as they tangle me in knots.
The washing machine that is my head cannot discern what is clean and
 what is dirty...
Perhaps I am ignorant and reject wisdom.
How hard it is to do what is right
 when all you have to rely upon is what you think you know
 (Heathcote 2000: 19).

What have we in the wisdom of older age offered to youth today on the physical aspects of relationships? Sex, the passionate erotic life-force, is also a central issue in our relationship with God, who fully embraced human flesh in Jesus. This passionate force, which drives to ever deepening levels of experience, is the very essence of incarnation, of flesh-taking. Our relationship with God reflects and is reflected in all of our human relationships.

In history

In our historical past, the sex act has been regarded primarily for the purpose of procreation. In this understanding, ancient philosophers formed an ethics surrounding sex based on the necessity of women being sexual partners to only one man, secured by

the legal seal of marriage. This ensured the validity of inheritance and also, in times of uncertainty about the immortality of humankind, that the ones to carry the family name into ensuing generations were in truth extensions of their legitimate 'father', the seed of his loins.²

During the twentieth century, humankind moved to a focus on psychology, and a consciousness that the relational experience is central to the human spirit. Greater knowledge of women's biology and scientific advances in contraception have resulted in sexual activity having no longer its essence in procreation. Sex has been freed, as has been claimed, from procreational ends to become recreational, from repression to expression. Are women now in a better position? In the television show, *Seinfeld*, modern young men exchange techniques (one known as “the move”) to pleasure women in a repeat culture of male performance, replacing the previous perceived performance of virility which was the fathering of a child, especially a son. The expectations of performance of both men and women are consolidated in constant idealised, unrealistic sex scenes in the media. The expectations, that even casual dating involves culmination in the sex act, ignores the spiritual damage often inflicted in a flippant disregard for the profound experience of sexual intimacy. Towards a spirituality of sexual activity, where then does one begin?

² Only in the early 19th century, with the invention of the microscope, was there proof that women made a physical contribution to conception. Prior to this time, the male sperm was accepted as the complete source of new human life. Women then were seen to provide only the womb or field in which the male seed was sown. Hence the perfect specimen of childhood was the replica of his father, a son.

Past conditioning in popular literature: a man's perspective

Personally, I need to begin in my past, one option being to name the insidious conditioning in accepted popular Australian fiction. In 1957, the year that my husband and I were married, D'Arcy Niland published *Call me when the Cross turns over*, dedicating the story to "my wife, Ruth Park". In the book, the "good" man is dominant, leads and protects, which gives him the right, even perceived responsibility, to chastise by physical abuse. The "good" woman is submissive, loves by acceptance of whatever her man offers her, is respected for her virginity until marriage, making her a prize for his sexual initiation; yet for him, masculine sexual freedom also enhances his reputation socially.

In *Call me when the Cross turns over*, the heroine, Barbie Cazabon, is depicted as strong and totally admirable. After the death of her mother during her childhood, Barbie grows to adult beauty with her father, an itinerant worker who wanders in a man's world through outback communities of opal fields, wheat districts and old mining towns in Australia. In the words of the book's foreword abstract, Barbie is the "true woman, loving and lovable", mixing it with passes in the crudest language from the roughest of men, yet saving herself sexually for the man of her marriage.

In the story, Barbie thought of the man she would marry as "not one ... who had to be driven and led...The man I want, he's got to be my master, my leader" (91). When Barbie made a decision for marriage, "she knew she had a protector, a hunter, and a lover" (149). Dreaming of her love, "he was strength and she was submission" (158). In her loss through misunderstanding of this man, Barbie mourns, "I want him so much and I can't have him. I wish he'd walk over that hill and come and get me...He could

beat me if he wanted to. Do anything he liked” (179-180). Barbie gives advice to a work-worn friend, Ethel, who ran away after being abused and struck by her husband, “I don't think you should have left him, Ethel. I know you had to, but I don't think you should have...Don't you think you should go back?”(151). Barbie's attitude here is reflected again in her feelings for her new husband, Joe. “She felt a tenderness of compassion for him. She knew she could never leave him, not for anything. He could beat her. He could starve her. She would never leave him” (208).

While Barbie reserves herself physically for her marriage, the hero men in the story are depicted as admirably masculine in the easy bestowal of sexual favours. As Barbie tells her husband, “I'm glad I kept myself for you”, and asks whether she is “the first” for him. He replies, “No, but you're the best. The others meant nothing to me. They were like a feed when you're hungry, a drink when you're thirsty” (207). Consider further a friend of the heroine, Edna's account of her encounter with an earlier proposed husband of Barbie.

Down in the yard, when I was pegging out the washing, I had both arms up, see, and he came past and put his big hands around my waist and squeezed. Gee, I said, you wouldn't take advantage of a defenceless woman, would you? The day you're defenceless, sister, he said, that's the day me and the big feller are waiting for...Oh, gee, it was nice...But what big feller...that's one bit I didn't get (110).

Again this central male figure, named Fascinatin, speaks of his view of women, “Nobody's easier to fool than a woman. You can put it over them like that”(135) and he snapped his fingers.

Call me when the cross turns over portrays the ideal monogamous committed sexual relationship within a structure of complementarity, with power of men over women, a situation making mutual spiritual intimacy between the couple an impossibility. The book constructs women as “other” in the concept used by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* and summed up by Drusilla Modjeska as follows:

By being all that man is not, woman reflects him back in glory; transcendent to her immanent, subject to her object. He speaks; she listens. He sees; she is seen. Like a mirror, it is she who reflects; it is she who is seen, and in being seen, sees (1994:136).

A “good” woman’s sexual experience embodies her “otherness” as “less than”.

Past conditioning in popular literature: a woman's perspective

D'Arcy Niland's “good” woman, Ruth Park, herself a prize-winning author, wrote *The Good Looking Women* in 1962, exposing a Catholic household of strong, dominated women in mid-twentieth century Sydney. The model of male/female relationship in Niland’s *Call me when the Cross turns over* actually creates the dysfunctional family of a mother, father and four sisters in this story by Park. *The Good Looking Women* is the story of people bound by the need to obey blindly, due to a lack of education and freedom to control their lives. The understanding of God as threatening eternal punishment for disobedience compounds the sense of insecurity. The control of married sexuality, with the resultant fear, ignorance, frustration and repression, distances man and woman in relationship, aborting the quest for spiritual intimacy.

The father of the house, Wally Pond, referred to in the novel as *Pa*, was central, while distant. “He came into the room and all was changed. The spiritual smell of women, sharp and sly and acid, vanished in a twinkling before the gust of masculinity that came with Pa” (15). While an older sister notes in his relationship with the clinging dependent youngest daughter, “They've both been starved for years for intimate contact with one another” (215), Wally Pond epitomises the role of the “good” man, husband and father, telling it thus: “Do your job well...and look after your wife and kids and don't let no man down, and God will be on your side” (192). A no-nonsense man, he comments that “womenfolk...kept things alive mostly by talking about them” (33).

Rosa Pond, *Ma*, was the essential “good” woman, trudging home with a heavy bag of groceries after “looking for penny savings”,

She went all over her aches and pains like a geographer over a globe - wisdom tooth, grumbling a little, creaking uneasily in its foundations like an old house; feet, feeling as though they'd been sandpapered; stomach, some sort of small shrill squabble still going on down there. She was making a novena to St Philomena for her backache, but really her kidney pills had done her just as much good. She was thirsty too....(5)

Ma found her identity in what she could do for her family. Responding to the pudding her mother baked for her, the daughter cries,

“Oh, Ma, what would I do without you?”

The words were gold and rubies to Mrs Pond. Though she smiled depreciatingly, she raked them into her memory to be greedily counted

and gloated upon during those long hours when Wally was restless and she was not able to sleep (189).

Ma and Pa “had long passed the stage of embracing each other, but Pa gave Mrs Pond a look dearly familiar, more understanding, sweeter than a kiss” (29). Ma described their relationship in the words, “He's known me twice as long as my own parents knew me. And he's always been a stone wall, something to keep the rain off, something to lean on in the sunshine...No matter what happened, I always had Wally” (183).

But Geraldine, the daughter reared to be dependent, was the “insurance against loneliness” that Mrs. Pond needed, though she was not conscious that she was using the young woman, born in her later age, to serve this purpose for her (216). Geraldine, the scape goat of the dysfunctional family, names her own burden: “You brought me up to be Daddy’s girl, Ma’s little faithful shadow, and now I don't want to be anything else. I don't want to escape, like other girls do. This is my escape from the world outside” (221). Geraldine was the scape-goat substitute for marital intimacy.

Ruth Park’s story of the Catholic family is about a simple faith, which met a deep, profound need of the ordinary people.

These poor ordinary people were dressed up in their Sunday best, but they were poor all the same, in some inexplicable way...bereft of any real security, frightened of the future with its totalitarianism and its nuclear explosions, ravenous as any crowd of peasants...in search of something, assurance, comfort. They wanted to know that Our Father who art in Heaven was truly there (146-147).

In the words of the story, “Mrs Pond had made of the terse, cold realities of Christianity, a fairy-tale of medals, holy water, enormous faith, and small, pious superstitions” (9). The fairy-tale was maintained by an awe of all people and matters elevated on the “religious” level. When the religious sisters (their daughter and her companion) visit the home, frantic instructions are given for Wally to tidy his hair and put on his coat and shoes to receive them (97).

Yet living out the prescriptions adhering to that faith were far from the “fairy-tale”, espoused to make bearable the bitter pill of reality. One of the Pond daughters, Elva - her beauty faded, in “the pit of hopeless fatigue in which she lived” - bore eight children in the first twelve years of marriage (24). When resisting the affectionate approach of her husband, “afraid that anything will set him off”, he seizes her savagely. She, in tears, kicks him cruelly, to his response, “What do you think I’m made of?” Elva understands his difficulty in abstaining from sexual expression in his and her desire to express their love in touching, but dreads the possibility of another pregnancy - which, in fact, becomes the eventual climax of this situation. Her husband, in the conclusion of the book, decides to take steps to “make sure” there will be no more children. Yet for him there is deep grief in his acceptance of exclusion from the church community, the comfort of the “fairy-tale”.

Carrie, another daughter, suffered in her own way. Unable to face a second birth, after a first difficult delivery, she terminates their second pregnancy. Her husband felt he could no longer live with her, calling her “a murderous slut” (17). He eventually took another woman as partner in his life - unable to marry, as he declined to disobey the

church and divorce his first wife. The reverse side of the “fairy-tale” revealed exclusion, shame and dread of the threat of agony in eternal life after death.

In both novels, men and women in relationship are contracted to expected roles and behaviours within firm boundaries. The contracts are stable but the roles and behaviours, maintained by both gender, ensure male control and thwart the quest for intimacy and shared vulnerability. Dysfunction is the result.

The story by Niland ends up happily – the male hero in the arms of the woman he loves and who loves him. Ruth Park’s, the woman’s story, concludes on a tragic note – the young woman unable to take up her invitation to life. Too often this has been the story of the sexual experience of men and woman in relationship. He is happy when what is seen as his needs and rights are met, and she is left unable to enjoy the fullness of life.

The pursuit of intimacy

Past conditioning has been detrimental to the possibility of emotional, relational, spiritual intimacy between a couple. As in the fictitious stories by Ruth Park and D’Arcy Niland, the quest of Barbie Cazabon and the members of the Pond family for intimacy becomes subverted, when constructed gender roles and imposed sexual discipline replace the personal journey towards wholeness, towards the fullness of one’s own truth.

Yet every human person longs for relationship. From our infancy in a family situation, where bonding is experienced as essential to survival, we strive through life to

experience meaningful relationships with others. Pope John Paul II expresses our human nature well in his words,

People cannot live without love. They remain beings that are incomprehensible to themselves: their life is senseless if love is not revealed to them, if they do not encounter love, if they do not experience it and make it their own, if they do not take part intimately in it (1979:10).

We long to be a special person to some other person/s, to know that when we enter a room there will be another or others whose face will light up at the sight of us. This desire is not about *doing*, what we do. It is about *being*, who we are. At our deepest centre, each human person longs to be known in truth by another or others, and to know another or others at that deep level.

This desire for intimacy, for the affirmation of one's deepest self by another, is however not the end of the quest for selfhood, but simply the beginning; and intimacy can never be a complete sharing between two people, to the satisfaction of each of them.. As we are initially enraptured by the virtue and beauty of another, we long also that this romanticised other will reflect to us our own idealised self. The truth is that, if we are blessed with an experience of reality, our expectations will result in disillusionment. In finding that the "other" holds in tension both strength in virtue and beauty but also weakness in these same areas, we too are invited in our disillusionment to begin to accept the truth of our own human reality.

Authentic intimacy, beginning with the desire and attraction to the other/s, moves through disillusionment towards an acceptance of one's own selfhood. Yet as Rainer Maria Rilke writes:

A complete sharing between two people is an impossibility, and whenever it seems, nevertheless, to exist, it is a narrowing, a mutual agreement which robs either one member or both of his (sic) fullest freedom and development. But, once the realization is accepted that, even between the closest human beings, infinite distances continue to exist, a wonderful living side by side can grow up, if they succeed in loving the distance between them which makes it possible for each to see the other whole and against a wide sky! (quoted in Lindburgh 1997: 97).

Though one needs another or others to come to understand oneself, that gift from others can always only be partial.

Therefore, the vulnerability of self-disclosure risks almost certainly some degree of misunderstanding, hurt and/or lack of interest from the other. Whereas to come to an evolving ownership of self, one does need another or others for self-disclosure, the expectation from earlier psychological theories of “sharing” is that self-disclosure to another will result in complete acceptance and understanding. The reality is that for self-disclosure to be the source of self-affirmation, one needs also to have the ability to self-soothe. Self-soothing is being able to ride the gambit of one’s emotions and to care for oneself. In the words of marital therapist David M. Schnarch, this “involves assuaging [one’s own] pain, mollifying [one’s own] anger, softening [one’s own] shock, pacifying [one’s own] fears and comforting [one’s own] sorrow and disappointment”. Schnarch notes that self-soothing is the antithesis of repression or denial of feelings (1991: 184).

To the extent to which relationships do become splintered or broken, this centering within one's self opens the possibility to move from blame and shame to mourning and grief, which offers the possibility of freedom and peace. Drusilla Modjeska writes that as a culture, as a nation, we think blame is easier than grief. Blame projects the pain as anger onto another. In grief the pain is taken to oneself, owned and carried. "... [G]rief is passed through and brings understanding. Blame remains", writes Modjeska (1994:154).

Intimacy, allied rhetorically to physical love-making (though no longer narrowed to that understanding), presents images of nakedness and vulnerability. The beatitudes (Lk 6:20-23, Matt 5:1-12) affirm a blessedness in simplicity and vulnerability. Yet one's vulnerability is truly blessed only when it comes from a free acceptance of personhood and is not the result of coercion or a lack of protection due to a denial of self. Intimacy has no place for control. Angela Tilby sees the contemporary attitude to sex designed to control, rather than to liberate. She writes,

We have lost our romanticism, our courage towards one another and towards God. To commit, to say, this is for life, is something we seem unable to do. We hear the call, "Arise my love..." but we want a weekend break rather than a lifetime.... Couples say "we want love but not commitment" and this is a mandate for control either of sex or time or affection or friendship - because the other is needy, vulnerable, caring, endlessly hopeful....(1997: 50)

Authentic intimacy in a sexual relationship demands that each partner is open to the opportunity of growth by nature of the relationship. The attitude to sex to-day is akin to

the religious “fairy-tale” of yesterday, by which those with power controlled the lives of others by ignorance and superstition. Sexual freedom without restraint is a quest for power in opposition to a vulnerability of blessedness. Charlotte Burck and Gwyn Daniel claim that the quest for power is also “the drive...to transcendence”, the desire of humans for “a God-like invulnerability...the ability to affect others without being affected ourselves” (1995:53). In the past “the masked emotional dependence of men has inhibited their willingness, and their capacity, to be made thus vulnerable”, in the opinion of Anthony Giddins (1992:62).

Vulnerability conjures up images of openness, incompleteness, of *being* rather than *doing*. For so long in the patriarchal culture of church we have used the language of doing, of acts. Love-making was termed officially the “conjugal act”. We spoke about doing acts - going to Mass, having sex – rather than of worship as a celebration of community and of sex, as love-making. Today, due to the resurging voices of women, there is a move from a focus on *doing* an action to an incorporating of acts in *being*.

In Christian circles, there has been a denial of reality in the suppression of the recognition of the Godness of sexuality and in the subsequent suppression of sexual deviance in those elevated as saintly and holy. In Catholicism, it has been seen to be imperative that Mary, the mother of Jesus, remain virginal in her later married life. Where the virginity of Mary is a focal belief to the recognition of Jesus as God, the attitude to on-going Marian virginity reflects a denigration of sexual activity. God is most present in reality. God resides in truth. How do we find the reality of God in the reality of our cultural sexual experience today? I don't believe that one person or one thesis or one generation for that matter can fully express a spirituality of sexual activity

because we have had millennia of enforced, negative philosophy and theology on issues of sexuality. Mary Grey states emphatically that there is a,

desperate need *to live out* new expressions of human sexuality in distinctive female meanings... We want an end to being objects of pleasure, fantasy, manipulation and exploitation. ...We long for an end to the cheapened and degraded versions of eros, sexual desire currently fashionable. We yearn for safe spaces, spaces of trust, where sexuality can be expressed as tenderness, in compassion, in joy, in friendship. And we ground our hope for this in the eros of God, whose eros for us is consistent, passionate and grounds us in our sexual reality, our distinctive female sexuality (1997: 93-94).

In response to the question of this paper, where do we begin to gather thoughts towards a spirituality of sexual activity, we must presume in Christian circles that such a spirituality will begin in Jesus' attitude to sexuality. Thomas Moore in his *Soul of Sex: cultivating Life as an Act of Love* describes the Jesus of the gospels as

unusually kind, open-minded, accepting and understanding of those who are obviously confused about their sexuality. The Gospel Jesus is also intimate, emotional, physically expressive, and even sensual in many ways. The Jesus of the moralizing preacher, in contrast, is inhumanly pure and uncompassionately asexual...The sexuality of Jesus consists in his openness to strangers and friends, the physicality of his healing, the sacramentality in his approach to food, the tolerance he displays in the face of sexual transgression and his espousal of a philosophy based on love. Only a worldview mired in materialism could fail to see the sexuality in this

expansive and inclusive erotic philosophy. The sexual teachings of Jesus, told best through his example, present a soul-centered eroticism in which friendship and a compassionate heart are not only included but placed at the center (1998:68, 72).

A Christian spirituality of sexual activity has a foundation in friendship and compassion. In a reflection of the egalitarian attitude of Jesus, sexual activity embodies a pleasurable experience for both woman and men, the mutual responsibility for which is carried by both gender. This, on the one hand, proposes a sexual desire aroused in emotional, relational, spiritual intimacy. In circular movement, on the other hand, a sexual relationship of authentic intimacy is bound to the ownership of one's own sexual self and one's right to pleasure. The pursuit of intimacy is an on-going journey of growth, never complete, a journey of vulnerability needing for each the ability to self-affirm. Awareness of one's own agenda in sexual activity is itself an opportunity for self-knowledge and an indicator of one's sense of self.

Chickens or children and eggs are another story!!

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