
SEXUALITY & SPIRITUALITY

Focus

A heartfelt longing to reconcile homosexuality and Christian teaching led Troy Perry to establish Metropolitan Community Church, and the integration of sexuality and spirituality remains at the core of MCC's Statement of Purpose. This holy conversation invites participants to work through the thorny spiritual issues that arise as a result of both their own sexuality and the many sexualities and sexual expressions found within MCC, and to consider how our sexual practices and experiences can be a gateway to a more intimate relationship with God.

A Testimony about Integrating Sexuality & Spirituality: One Man's Journey

Contributed by Skip Chasey

In my slightly conservative, WASP family there were two subjects that, if not absolutely off-limits, were considered impolite topics for discussion: money and sex. Because of that, and because of the paucity of sex education in the public schools that I attended, and because the Baptist church of my youth discouraged any talk of sex and sexuality other than that which came from the pulpit, I grew up somewhat sexually ignorant. Indeed, until I began college I was all but asexual. Oh, I had a small series of prom dates and short-lived girlfriends with whom I made out (only once venturing beyond first base, and then only barely reaching second), but that was more because of social expectations and peer identification than anything else. There was for me no strong sexual component to those interactions, and I had no awareness of that being unusual in any way. I certainly had no idea that I was gay; indeed, that possibility never even occurred to me.

Such ignorance was both a blessing and a curse, a curse in that my sexual naiveté contributed to my not fitting in with the rest of the boys of my youth, and a blessing in that I experienced none of the guilt, shame and self-loathing that marks the childhood and adolescence of so many gay men. I simply didn't know. Ignorance can sometimes truly be bliss.

It wasn't until I was in college that my sexual awakening occurred. The story behind that would make for a good soap opera arc; suffice it to say that the first time I went "all the way" with someone it was with my best friend Jamie, in the shower of my parents' bathroom while they were out of town, sometime during our

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sophomore year. Thirty-four years later the steady drumming of warm water upon my naked back will oftentimes bring me to arousal.

But I had figured out that I was gay even before that fateful experience—sex with Jamie simply confirmed it. And once again, by grace, I experienced virtually no guilt or shame. Having been “raised right,” I knew that I was inherently good, and I intuitively knew that if being gay was a part of who I was, then that, too, had to be good. My only concern during that early coming out time was that I might not really be gay, that I might be heading down a path that wasn’t authentically mine. It would take several more sexual experiences (alas, none of which occurred in a shower) before that concern fell away.

So right from the start my sexuality was intrinsically intertwined with my spirituality. However, my understanding of the symbiosis of that connection lay dormant until 1996, by which time I had been in two committed, monogamous relationships, one for fourteen years that ended with Victor’s death in October of 1992, and the other for three years that ended with Gary and I parting amiably, albeit sadly, in the Spring of 1997. While I wasn’t consciously integrating sexuality and spirituality in either of those relationships, or even had a conceptual understanding of such integration, I knew that each relationship, being rooted in love, was eminently pleasing to God. It was only after attending a weekend retreat for the men of MCCLA led by Rev. Jim Mitulski in 1996 that the desire to consciously integrate my sexuality and spirituality was kindled.

Both the title of that retreat—“Men Talking Sex”—and its premise were simple: as (supposedly) sexually evolved gay men, we have no trouble discussing sex and our sexual experiences using generalized language, but many, perhaps most, of us still find it tremendously difficult to talk about what specifically turns us on. Exploring and identifying the reasons behind that and actually engaging in a facilitated, supportive, intimately personal discussion of this sensitive topic was the focus of the retreat, and a profound sexual and spiritual healing occurred for many in attendance, myself included. Jim encouraged those of us who had benefited from the retreat to continue engaging in this discussion on a regular basis, and four of us did as he suggested, meeting monthly in each other’s homes for nearly two years.

What was most significant for me about that retreat and those subsequent meetings was that I finally fessed up to my spiritual community about being a leatherman or, more accurately, about wanting to be a leatherman. I say “wanting to be a leatherman” because while I had persuaded both of my lovers to engage with me in some of the sexual activities that fall under the category of “leathersex” (one with more enthusiasm than the other), and while I had for years been making more and more frequent forays into leather bars and the clandestine world of leathermen and leathersex, it was only relatively recently that I had come out—first to myself and then to Gary—about how important this form of sexual expression was to my sexual fulfillment.

The truth was that my earliest erotic memory, going back to age 3, involved bondage dominance and submission, and that erotic focus had only intensified as I got older. I knew that I was “kinky” long before I knew that I was gay. And like those who become aware of their homosexual nature at a young age, I also knew not to talk about it—that’s where my sexual shame lay. That shame didn’t stop me from acting on my desires, however, both as an adolescent (thank God for the Boy Scouts!) and as an adult, but I did so from a very dis-integrated place. And so while I may have been born kinky, I wasn’t yet “leather”—I had yet to fully expose this part of my sexual shadow to the light of consciousness—and the light of God—and do the integration work that claiming the additional identity of “leatherman” would require.

The root word of integration is integrity, which means “a state of wholeness”, and one definition of healing is “to make whole.” Integration leads to healing, and thanks be to God my burden of shame was soon lifted

following the conscious integration of all parts of my sexual self. Only by claiming my complete sexual identity, without shame and without apology, was a full integration of my sexuality and spirituality possible. This journey of integration has led me to some amazing initiatory, rite-of-passage, Self- (with a capital “S”) realization and, dare I say, mystical experiences, experiences through which I’ve made direct and embodied connections with the Divine.

Some Centering Quotes on Sexuality & Spirituality

“The Bible isn’t anti-sex. ... It sings the praises of sexual pleasure and desire.”
(Teresa Hornsby, *Sex Texts from the Bible*)

“Sexuality and spirituality are, after all, closely linked in the Bible and in our personal experience. ... Sexual experience and expression, like spiritual experience and expression, are moved and driven by a deep inner vital force in our personalities that prompts us to reach out for the kind of connection with the other that we intuitively believe will make us whole and complete.”
(J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration*)

“It will not do for gay persons to try to place their gayness to one side, as it were, when embarking on a deeper spiritual quest. Gayness is all about whom and how we love, and love is the most fundamental of spiritual emotions. Gay persons also cannot set aside their sexuality, because we inhabit physical bodies of the same gender that arouses us sexually. We of all people must learn to integrate emotions, sexuality, and spirituality to succeed in the task of spiritual enlightenment.”
(William Schindler, *Gay Tantra*)

“When we touch the place in our lives where sexuality and spirituality come together, we touch our wholeness and the fullness of our power, and at the same time our connection with a power larger than ourselves.”
(Judith Plaskow, *Standing Again at Sinai: Judaism from a Feminist Perspective*)

“Though the Bible handles this subject matter [sex] much differently than the secular world, it does have much to say on the subject. I can only think of one reason for matters pertaining to sex to be so frequently discussed in the Bible—sexuality must be very closely related to spirituality.”
(Bob Deffinbaugh, *Sex and the Spiritual Christian*)

“I think I am not unusual to have grown up with a deeply entrenched split between body and spirituality. In our culture this division is expressed as the split between matter and spirit, or, more specifically, between the body’s sexuality and spirituality. It is worth considering whether this is the predisposition of all established religions, or predominantly that of the Judeo-Christian cultures of the West. While living in the East, it became apparent that within Eastern religions there are two distinct schools. One sees the relationship to the body and matter ideologically as the foundation of suffering and confusion; the other views the body and the elemental energies in nature as fundamental to the vitality of our spiritual life. These two views exemplify the difference between the exoteric and the esoteric traditions.”
(Rob Preece, *The Psychology of Buddhist Tantra*)

“Unfortunately, the church has spent the better part of 20 centuries overmoralizing sex. There is no biblical foundation for this. If one asks why this should have happened, the only way an answer can be found is that either powerful authorities in the early church were uncomfortable about their own sexuality and projected their pathology upon Christian theology and ethics; or the bishops realized very early that

overmoralizing sexual behavior offered an enormous tool for control of the constituency of the church.”
(J. Harold Ellens, *Sex in the Bible: A New Consideration*)

“Sexuality is much more of an integral and holistic part of the human experience than the activity of genital sex. It is the source of our capacity for relationship, for emotional and erotic connection, for intimacy, for passion and for transcendence. It is a holistic expression of our human experience as body-selves. . . . Consequently, sexuality is ‘neither incidental nor detrimental’ . . . to spirituality, but an important and integrated dimension of it. . . . In other words, it is through the sensuality of human sexuality (which includes but is not limited to genital sex) that individuals can experience a direct erotic connection with the God of one’s understanding. In the language of Christian theology, embodiment is incarnation—the Holy is known and experienced in the flesh.”

(M.J. Horn *et al*, ‘Sexuality and Spirituality: The Embodied Spirituality Scale’, *Theology and Sexuality*)

Holy Conversations: Exploring My and Our Understanding of Sexuality & Spirituality

Points of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): In what ways have you been able to integrate your sexuality and your spirituality? What integration still needs to occur? What, if anything, is getting in the way of a full and complete integration? What, if anything, needs healing in your life, and how might that need for healing be related to spiritual/sexual dis-integration?

Points of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): How easy was it for you to engage in conversation about such a personal and sensitive topic? What insights did you gain from sharing your experiences and thoughts about sexuality and spirituality, and what did you gain from listening to others sharing theirs as well? What, if anything, was challenging for you about this conversation? Is this a conversation that you would be willing to continue?

Additional Thoughts About Sexuality & Spirituality

MCC Stories, Our Stories

Within MCC there is a wide variety of sexual orientations, identities, expressions and experiences among its members, laity and clergy alike. We are gay men and lesbian women, bisexuals and heterosexuals of both genders. We’re legally married (or desire to be), in committed relationships and happily single and sexual. We’re sexually monogamous, serially monogamous, promiscuous, polyamorous and have open relationships. We enjoy anonymous sex, group sex, recreational sex and one night stands. Our sexual proclivities run from mild to wild, with some of us joyously fulfilled by “vanilla” sexual experiences while for others of us only the esoteric experiences of leathersex, fetishism and BDSM will do. We have differing opinions and beliefs when it comes to the ethics, politics and practice (or not) of safer sex. We’re staunch in our assessments of what constitutes a suitable sexual partner, and exceedingly flexible with respect to their appearance, body type and, at times, even their gender. And some of us are contentedly celibate.

Then there are our diverse cultural differences and ethnic histories with respect to sexuality and, in particular, sexuality as it relates to our Christian faith. For example, Kelly Brown Douglas points out that “Pre-Christian Hebrew life showed little tendency toward seeing the body as an impediment to spirituality. Sexuality apparently was appreciated as a gift from God, as evidenced . . . by the celebration of sensuality in the Song of Solomon. Yet Christianity gradually became influenced by those aspects of Greek thought that

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denigrated the body and fostered a profound split between the body and the spirit. ... [This] ‘spiritualistic dualism’ alienated persons from their sexuality as it demanded the denial of their body-selves.”¹ But, she goes on to note, “Central to the faith of Black church people, a legacy from the religion of the enslaved, is the attestation of Jesus as Christ, the embodied presence of God, and the avowal that Black people are created in God’s own image. These two theological confessions suggest the centrality of sexuality to the Black Christian Faith.”²

While the Bible has a lot to say about sex and sexuality, only a few passages speak to the joys of sex and affirm our sexual nature. When the Bible was written, it was expected and accepted that people would have active and passionate sex lives—there was little need for the writers of the Bible to encourage early Christians in that regard. Therefore, when those Biblical authors addressed sexuality, they mostly focused on the perils of sexual immorality. Interestingly, very few specific sex *acts* are labeled as inherently immoral. Rather, it’s a small handful of sexual *conditions* and *practices* that, rightly or wrongly, have been deemed to be immoral in most translations of the Bible: adultery; fornication; incest; lust; masturbation; bestiality; and homosexuality.

MCC has led the Christian world in examining what the Bible actually says and does not say about homosexuality, and respected Biblical scholars from all parts of the Christian church have subsequently challenged the long-standing, erroneous translations and interpretations of Scripture that pertain to same-sex loving. As a result, only the most unenlightened still believe that the Bible categorically condemns gay men and lesbian women who engage in loving sexual activity with persons of the same gender. So what about the other sexual practices that the Bible supposedly decries as immoral? Should we not likewise reject conventional wisdom regarding those as well, and instead endeavor to understand what “sexual immorality” actually meant for the people of that specific time and place (and how and why that was so), and then apply that understanding to our own contemporary situations and circumstances?

For example, what constitutes fornication for a people not permitted to legally wed, like those of us residing in most of the United States? How, in this third decade of the HIV and AIDS pandemic, could masturbation be considered sinful? And if the partners in a marriage or committed relationship are agreeable to one or both having outside sexual relationships, is it still adultery?

“This has been difficult”, Rev. Elder Nancy Wilson states, “because for the most part we have seen our theological agenda as trying to ‘normalize’ gay sexuality for the public, struggling for our human rights, wanting simply to be included in the panorama of human life and lifestyle. We’ve been bogged down by the necessity to do biblical or theological *apologetics*. But what if we actually claimed a role in *reshaping the basic questions* concerning God and human sexuality?”³

“Queer Theology” is a sexual theology. Getting clear about where we fall on the sexual morality scale is fundamental to our spiritual development.

¹ Douglas, Kelly Brown, *Sexuality and the Black Church* (Orbis Books, 1999) 25, 29

² Douglas, 112

³ Wilson, Rev. Nancy, *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus, and the Bible* (Harper Collins, 1995) 231

Biblical Passages About Sexuality

Genesis 1:26-31a
Ruth 1:6-18
I. Samuel 17:55-18:4
Proverbs 5:18-19
Song of Solomon 1:2
Song of Solomon 4:10-15

Song of Solomon 5:2-6
Song of Solomon 7:1-13
Song of Solomon 8:1-4
Song of Solomon 8:6-7
John 1:1-14

Holy Conversations: Seeking, Sharing and Stretching

Point of Reflection (Small Group Reflection): How can we maintain integrity with our own sexual ethics and morality and still “be church” with others who have different morals and ethics when it comes to sexuality?

Point of Reflection (Small Group Discussion): Where as a church do we draw the line with respect to sexuality and morality? Must there be a line? Why or why not?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Reflection): For many of us, “gay”, “lesbian”, “straight”, or “bisexual” is not the entirety of our sexual identity. Would it benefit us as a church to publicly acknowledge and recognize all of the sexualities and sexual identities within the membership of MCC? If so, how would it be beneficial to us?

Point of Reflection (Large Group Discussion): What would be the risks of being more open about the many sexualities and sexual identities among the members of MCC? Are the potential benefits worth the risk?

Pulling it All Together: An Integration Meditation

(Note: The meditative nature of this exercise benefits greatly from having an appropriate piece of sacred music played at low volume throughout its duration. The exercise begins with the participants sitting in a circle; if the group is so large that a single circle is not possible the participants can sit in smaller circles consisting of at least six participants per circle.)

Sitting with your eyes gently closed, hold your hands open in your lap one on top of the other, with the fingers of one hand overlapping those of the other. Begin to breathe slowly and deeply, but gently, inhaling through your nose and exhaling through your slightly open mouth. On your in-breath, imagine energy coming up from the core of the earth, through your perineum (your root chakra), up the center of your body and out through the top of your head (your crown chakra). On your out-breath, imagine energy traveling down from the heavens through the top of your head, down along your neck and spine and out through your perineum.

After a couple of minutes of this mindful breathing, allow your imagination to create a mental image that is especially sacred to you. Hold that image in your mind’s eye as you continue to breathe slowly and deeply, and then return your focus to the energy that’s running through your body in both directions. Next allow your imagination to create an image that holds a strong erotic charge for you, continuing to breathe slowly

and deeply and, after a few moments, return your focus to the energy running through your body. Without hurrying, continue to shift your focus between the sacred image, the erotic image and the energy flowing between your chakras.

As the music comes to an end, allow all of the images to fade away, and then bring your attention back to your breath. Allow your breath to return to its normal pattern and, when you feel ready, gently open your eyes.

Additional Resources

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*This book, in its "Spirit and the Flesh" section, contains an essay by Rev. Troy Perry entitled *A Meditation on Religion and Leatherspace*.