

Let's Talk About Sex

*So I read about love - read it in a magazine.... So don't tell me I don't understand...
So why - don't you moan and sigh. Why - do you sit there and cry? I do everything I'm supposed to do
If something's wrong, then it must be you...When I touch you there it's supposed to feel nice...
Richard Thompson ("Read about Love" Rumor and Sigh)*

*Your body needs to be held and to hold, to be touched and to touch. None of these needs is to be despised, denied, or repressed. But you have to keep searching for your body's deeper need, the need for genuine love. Every time you are able to go beyond the body's superficial desires for love, you are bringing your body home and moving toward integration and unity. -Henri Nouwen***

Sex – it's supposed to be easy. Even the Fundy Christians tell us that our bodies are programmed for it (hence the need to be wary of temptation and sin). When we were growing up, the magazines, movies and kids on the playground told us that all we had to do was put the right peg in the right hole and "wa lah!" we get instant ecstasy. The fact that it didn't work out so well pushed a lot of us to come out to ourselves. Once out, we brought the expectation that sex should be easy with us when we hopped on or over the fence.

Sex can be easy -- when everything is in synch and the stars are aligned. But even if the stars are aligned, things are rarely in synch. Sure, you're your juices may flow and you may "get off," but unless a whole set of conditions are met, you may walk away from the experience feeling somewhat cheated, like you had carob when you wanted chocolate, or like you fell deeper into isolation when what you were really craving was a sense of profound connection. Or maybe you felt the instant gratification that comes with orgasm but left resenting the strings that go with it either because you feel trapped and/or guilty by *their* strings or because *they* don't accept the strings that *you* unconsciously attached to sex.

In order for everything to be in synch, we have to talk openly and honestly with our partners about sex. Unfortunately, we often don't because shame gets in the way. Our culture tells us that our sexual desire is dirty, bad or just plain wrong. Add to this the cultural and subcultural pressure on women and gay men to be gorgeous, buff and perfectly groomed. It's hard to be comfortable in a body that we fear to be too thin, too fat, to saggy, too hairy, or just too not like the cover of a magazine. To speak openly about our desires -- to tell a partner what feels good, what feels less good, and what doesn't feel good at all and to expose our feelings about our imperfect bodies can bring us face to face with this shame. Rather than facing our shame, most of us try to circumvent it. We engage in all sorts of contortions to keep our partner(s) from seeing our less than perfect body parts and expect our partner(s) to read our bodies and our minds and to magically know what makes us zing.

But wait, there's more! Even if we're lucky enough to take pride both in our bodies and our sexual desire, we still have to contend with the fear that we won't or don't live up to our partner's expectations. The myth that sex is simple sets us up to believe that we are supposed to know what to do and how to do it to please ourselves and others. To ask our partner(s) what they want and how is a sign that we haven't quite mastered the book of love, and who wants to feel the shame of that?

Instead of asking, we follow recipes from books, magazines, videos and past sexual encounters. There are at least three problems with this approach. First, everyone's body is different. The exact same pressure on the exact same spot with the exact same rhythm that drove one partner to ecstasy may drive the next to flaccid indifference or frustrated annoyance. Second, our bodies are constantly changing. What felt fabulous yesterday may hurt today. And third, mood has a huge impact on sexual response. If one or both of you are frustrated, angry, stressed or sad, this may affect how both bodies respond. Add to this, there's nothing like a call from Mom to dampen a mood. If we don't talk to our partner(s) about what's going on, all we know is that their bodies aren't reacting the way we think they should. When this happens, it's easy to attribute their non-enthusiastic response to our sexual inadequacy and fall right into the shame we were trying to avoid.

The only way to escape shame's tyranny is to expose it in a safe way. Find a way to talk to your partner(s) honestly and openly about sex. If you don't trust your partner enough to talk to them about sex, it's probably not safe to be with them. If you can trust them, it's best to start the dialogue before you get started. Think of it this way, if you were planning a trip with someone, you'd want to discuss specifics like where you were going and for how long before you set off. This sort of planning doesn't mean that you can't skip a place here or stay a few days longer there. It just means you have a basic itinerary. You should have the same sort of conversation before you have sex with someone. Even if they kiss you with the passion of a thousand fires and you can feel the electricity between the two of you crackle in every cell in your body, you need to check out where they want to go with their sparks. If you assume that they want penetration when all they want to do is be caressed and kissed, you risk breaking something sacred. It's important to keep the communication channels open, telling your partner what feels good and what could feel better in the moment. For example, if they're being rough and your body is craving tenderness (or vice versa), ask them to soften (or intensify) their touch. It beats pretending to be satisfied when you really aren't.

Sometimes it's best to strike while the iron is cold. Rather than telling your partner that you are turned off by his sexual awkwardness or insecurity in the heat of the moment, it might be better to discuss this over coffee when both of you have your clothes on. If you frame it right, you may be able to help him let go of some of his shame. If you notice that that your partner seems more interested in touching you than in being touched and wonder what this is about, rather than make up stories like "I must suck as a lover," ask her what's going on. If you're embarrassed about the size of your thighs or by the keg that you see in the mirror where the fitness 'zines tell you your six-pack should be, find a way to talk about this. You might as well bring it out in the open. Unless they are stoned or high, they will probably notice that you put a lot of energy into hiding your perceived imperfections anyway. If you are a sexual abuse survivor and sometimes get triggered during or after sex, share what's going on for you with your partner. Let them help you through it.

Because the topic is so sensitive, it's best to follow the following basic format when you have this morning (or afternoon or evening after) conversation. First, let yourself soften into your body, so that you can feel the energy in your hands and feel your belly rise and fall with your breath. Second, find objective words to describe what they are doing or failing to do. Describe what they are saying or doing that turns you off (or your fears of what they will think of you) without criticism, judgment, evaluation (i.e. "you do this because..."), or generalization (i.e. you always, you never). Third, keep the focus on yourself (i.e. "When you roll over and push me away after you come, I think you are

rejecting me and I feel hurt.”). Fourth, put out a specific request for what you would like them to do. (I.e. “I’d like you to hold me for a little while after you come.”)

It’s probably clear that all this communication, risk taking and shame defying is a lot of work. But it’s only after you do this work that you can get everything “in synch.” So stop eating carob when you are craving chocolate and start sharing your sexual desires, aversions and fears with your partner(s). Isn’t it time you got what you really wanted?

**Henri Nouwen was a Dutch born Catholic Priest and writer who struggled both with intense feelings of loneliness (though he had some 1,500 personal friends) and with his homosexuality. It is perhaps his deep, soul wrenching struggle that makes his books (best known titles are: *The Wounded Healer*, *In the Name of Jesus*, *Inner Voice of Love*, *The Life of the Beloved* and *The Way of the Heart*) so compelling and popular. As a counselor, his *Inner Voice of Love*, is especially compelling because he simply published his diary from December 1987 to June 1988 during one of his most serious bouts with clinical depression. According to the biography by Michael Ford, he craved to be touched and held.

Originally appeared in Outlook: Everything is Political