

Lust, Sex* and Love

*I had a dream but it turned to dust
And what I thought was love that must have been lust*
Santana

*Passion is tumultuous, exhilarating, breathtaking. Lust is carnal, guttural, scorching hunger,
possessive. Attraction is projection, obsession, acknowledgment. Love simply is.*
Susan Ann Carroll

Sex: We are defined by it. Our culture is obsessed with it. We are bombarded with sexual images on TV, in the movies, on billboards, and in magazines. References to sex fill our air waves and stimulate many of our conversations. We spend endless hours fantasizing about it, planning it, and doing it. We laugh about it, cry about it and lie about it. But most of us have a hard time talking about it and few of us dare to think about sex outside of the physical or romantic realm. Instead, we hide “it” behind metaphors and suggestive innuendos.

Lust. Now that we can talk about. We tune in to our hormones and click into other people’s pheromones. We rank people according to how attractive we find them. We get turned on by “talking dirty.” We share our fantasies. And sometimes we describe our sexual escapades in riveting detail. In a culture that condemns sexuality in general and our sexuality in particular, talking about lust is revolutionary. Still, lust is solitary. We experience it by ourselves even when we are sharing it to someone else.

Despite what Freud, and the Pope (and other religious leaders) have told us, sex is about connection. Sex with a partner (or set of partners) is an act of intimacy. I’m not saying that sex doesn’t involve lust. I’m just saying that it goes deeper. Sex involves physical and emotional vulnerability. Any time we initiate a sexual encounter, even if it’s just a kiss, we risk the sting of rejection. Take off our clothes and we reveal our bodies -- blemishes, handle bars, scars, and all. But clothes do more than hide our flaws. They help us shape the impressions other people have about us. When we take off our clothes, we also strip off our props. We become an actor on the stage without a costume. We become emotionally as well as physically naked.

The further we go with a sexual encounter, the more vulnerable we become. In order to orgasm, we must let go of control. The French term for orgasm is *la petite mort*. Translated this means little death and refers to the loss of self. The ego fades as the lonely “I” dissolves into a merged “we.” Risky business indeed.

The danger comes from our fear of dropping the illusion that we are separate. Deep down, most of us believe that we will die if we tear down the walls we built to protect ourselves from others. We push people away to either keep from losing our autonomous, individual selves or to avoid the pain of abandonment and rejection. But the wall that protects us from others also separates us from ourselves.

Freud told us years ago that we are hardwired to have sexual desire. Turns out he was right about this. But he was wrong about how this works. So are all those morality hucksters that tell us that sex is sinful. Sexual desire is not simply a matter of primal emotions and base physical gratification.

Instead, neuropsychological research tells us that sexual desire first begins in the so called “higher” regions of the brain, the regions of the brain responsible for attunement with others (empathy) and self-awareness. This suggests that it is our need to connect emotionally – to ourselves and to others - that drives our desire to connect physically.

Sex teaches us how to surrender into the present moment, to our breath, to our bodies and to physical and emotional interconnection. It shows us that we can experience the ecstasy of connection when we are willing to let go of the illusion of separateness and merge with another. Sex shows how to be with another without our armor, to find a different kind of strength in vulnerability. In the process, it gives us a glimpse of what it’s like to connect with something greater than ourselves -- with a “we,” and perhaps, for an instant, to connect with the cosmic whole. I think that to connect, to truly encounter another without the defenses of our games and the protections of our stories and facades, to dissolve our egos in order to become a “we,” I think that to do this is to engage in unconditional love. This is lofty goal. It takes us beyond the rush of the “big bang” we feel when we climax. But isn’t it worth a try?

Thanks to Diane Fisher for the question that led to this column.

*Please note that sex is consensual. In the absence of consent, for whatever reason, what is happening could be rape which is a different phenomenon entirely.

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