

Love Lingers Here: Intimate Enduring Relationships

VI. The Complex Nature of Sexuality

William Bergquist

What does it mean to affirm the differences and resulting interdependence of men and women? Clearly, enduring, intimate relationships (by the very definition of the word "intimate") are assumed to be "consummated" with some sexual act. This sexual act, in some regards, affirms the interdependence of men and women—and the interdependence of men and men and women and women in gay and lesbian relationships. In this set of essays, however, we have chosen not to devote much attention to sexuality, *per se*, in part because so much has already been written about the subject. Furthermore, we found in our interviews that while sex was very important for some of the enduring couples that we interviewed, it was rarely the sole or even primary reason for these two people staying together.

The Second Myth

In our interviews with long-term, enduring couples we found that it is not all about sex. This is the second myth to be debunked. Usually, good sex is assumed to be at the heart of long-term enduring relationships. Sexual relations are often identified as the main problem cited by both husbands and wives when requesting help from a counselor or therapist. Yet, we found some many dynamics operating that were no specifically about sexuality. In part, this lack of attention among our couples to issues of sexuality may have come from their reticence to talk about such "personal" parts of their relationship. It also comes from the fact that sexuality is a very complex phenomenon that extends far beyond the act of sexual intercourse.

In one sense, the couples we were interviewed were often talking about the domain of sexuality, yet it often was expressed in terms of very special moments in their life together: a beautiful sunset, a heart-rendering piece of music, a nostalgic dance, a moment of touching

while sitting in front of a fire, a poem that one of them wrote to the other, even the gentle moment of compassion when one of the partners holds the other in their arms while grieving the death of a parent. These are all moments of sexuality, as it is (and should be) more broadly conceived. Moore (1993, p. 164) speaks eloquently to this issue:

A person can live erotically every minute of the day by valuing deep pleasures, beauty, body, adornment, decoration, texture and color – all things we too often consider secondary or even frivolous. . . . try to imagine a world without . . . the lure of travel and exploration, without the beguiling beauty that entices us to look at photographs of enchanting places, without a desire for a rich experience of this life.

At a later point, Moore (1994, p. 183) notes that:

As long as we think of sex in a limited way, as a biological function or even as only a means of communication or intimacy, we will be mystified by its unexpected turns. It would be better to recognize from the beginning that sex is a profound, far-reaching aspect of the soul, bringing together body, emotion, and imagination in an intensive experience that can touch every branch of feeling and meaning, yet one we may never fully understand. It is by nature mysterious.

This broader definition of sexuality is crucial in understanding the rather surprising extent to which we found that sexual intercourse, per se, was rarely identified by the people we interviewed as a critical point in the history of their relationship. We found that the first moment of intimacy rarely defined the initial formation of the couple (what we have identified as the "marker event" and which we discuss in the next essay) nor were ceremonies that grant permission for intimacy (such as the marriage ceremony) usually defined by contemporary couples as the moment when they first defined themselves as a couple. Sexuality more broadly defined, however, often did play a critical role. A shared experience of a beautiful sunset, in other words, may have been just as memorable and just as defining a moment in the couple's early history as the first time they made love.

Sex is Complicated!

Couples like Aaron and Becky talk about how sexuality often seems to take second place to other domains of their life together. As with many other couples, Aaron and Becky first noted that in having children, they found less time to be together in private so that they might make love. Even more basically, their first child "took the focus off of us," according to Aaron: "we took our love from each other and showered it on Deborah." He did go on to note that they are out of this phase now, and "even did it [sex] yesterday." They both laughed. "Once every two months, whether we need it or not," Becky added. Yet, Aaron also identifies their financial problems as very distracting and a barrier to their sex life: "we're so busy and preoccupied that sex is about the last thing on our minds." Aaron and Becky seem to differ from many other couples we interviewed or know personally only in the candor with which they talked about the problems of fitting their "sex life" into all of the other demanding and conflict-filled aspects of their life together.

Sexuality is also a complicating factor in most relationships because it means so much more than just intercourse and sexual gratification. Even Ben, who initially declared that sex is what keeps him and Tina together, went on to indicate that sexuality for him means much more than just intercourse or ejaculation. For him, it is the one way in which he believes that he can meet Tina's (and we suspect his own) needs for intimacy:

. . . we both enjoy [sex] and are very attracted to one another. It's the physical part of our relationship and all that goes with it. I guess, it is where I let down, become vulnerable, available, intimate, nurturing . . . you know all the things Tina craves, and gives in other ways as well as sexually, that I just give sexually.

Tina agrees with Ben's observations (in part):

You know it's true. It is a place that I know Ben loves me. He is giving, kind, sensitive, unhurried, truly loving, so it is very important to me as well, though, unlike Ben, I don't think it is the most important thing in our relationship or the singular thing that keeps us together. What I think keeps us together is that I understand what Ben's experience of things are, and what that means to him, and I think to a somewhat lesser degree, but enough to satisfy me, Ben understands my

experience of things and what they mean to me.

Thus, for Tina and Ben," sexuality becomes a meeting ground where mutual needs can be met. While this couple struggles with many different aspects of their relationship -- particularly regarding mutual commitment -- they find shared moments in their life, through their sexuality, where they can both be affectionate, caring and responsive to one another's most heartfelt needs.

In those cases where sexuality did play a central role in the ongoing relationship between long-term couples, it was often intertwined with other complex issues -- primarily issues concerning dominance, commitment and security. Such is the case with regard to the long-term relationship that has been established between Alice and Bryan, who have been together for fourteen years. Their interview is richly textured with many references to sexuality, lust and physical attraction; yet, in each instance, other interpersonal dynamics are involved as with most other couples. Alice and Bryan find each other desirable at specific moments in their relationship and these moments revolve around issues of power and acceptance.

From the first, physical attraction played a central role in the formation of Alice and Bryan's relationship. Bryan had obviously been attracted to Alice from the first moment that he met her in early June. Alice, however, was hesitant to go out with Bryan: "it wasn't that I didn't like him. But he seemed so pushy and so direct physically. I mean maybe I was put off by that . . . he really made a play for me and I didn't know if I wanted to remain just friends working alongside one another or whether I wanted to get more emotionally involved with him or if I could fight him off!" She finally agreed to their first date in mid-August.

Bryan grinned at this point and said: "Yeah. I was really attracted to her. . . . I knew this was it right away." They both laughed. Alice: "Isn't it strange? After a few dates I got more comfortable and I began to tune into my feelings for him more . . . and then I realized something very important to me: he was [to be] the father of my children and I was falling in Love with him. Well, lust really! And it was because he was [to be] the father of my children."

Alice stopped and then quietly added, as though to justify the statement: "when he asked me

to marry him [Alice turns to Bryan] he said, 'let's get married and have kids.' I knew that was exactly what I wanted, that he was the one." Looking at her, Bryan added: "I was really attracted to her sexually, and it was such a high going off with her every day. I knew that if I persisted one day she would have to agree with me. . . . I thought about her all the time."

As in the case of many couples, the basic patterns in Alice and Bryan's relationship are already firmly established during the first moments of their relationship. Furthermore, the story they have repeatedly told about these founding experiences further reinforces these patterns. For Alice, it is clear that sexuality is both alluring (a combination of "lust" and procreation) and repulsive (with Bryan being physically "pushy"). By contrast, Bryan views sexuality as the central ingredient of their relationship, yet also (at least for Alice's sake) values sexuality for its procreative potential.

Even after fourteen years of being a couple and twelve years of marriage, Alice feels ambivalent about her continuing role as the pursued partner. She was indecisive in the beginning and is currently concerned about her boundaries within their relationship. Alice feels that sexuality has a reproductive purpose and justifies her "surrender" in terms of procreation. However, it is also clear that Alice retains power in her relationship with Bryan through giving or withholding sexual intimacy (often for several weeks at a time).

Typically, according to Alice, after withholding sexual intercourse for several weeks, she will decide that Bryan "needs it" and will then sexually pursue her husband. "This is when sex is best," Alice claims. Bryan agrees that these are some of their most erotic and satisfying moments together. Thus, when Bryan becomes the pursued, Alice feels best about their relationship and about sexuality. Afterwards, they slip back into the old roles of Alice as pursued, Bryan as pursuer, and the cycle starts all over again, replicating their initial extended "meeting." As in many other parts of their lives together (for example, defining the nature and extent of their relationship with parents), Alice "manages" the situation and establishes boundaries. Bryan appears to be content in his dependency on Alice, given that he tends not to manage boundaries very effectively. Bryan consistently tries to get closer to Alice, while Alice moves in and out of her intimate relationship with Bryan, thereby keeping control of the relationship, reducing her own anxiety about intimate, long-term commitment, and preserving

her own independence.

This cycle of intimacy and distance has recently been disrupted as the children that both Alice and Bryan wanted have become a reality. With the birth of two children, Alice no longer believes that sexuality is needed for procreation, though she still believes that Bryan "needs it." She also realizes that her children have "needs" that she must meet. Consequently, Bryan sometimes feels abandoned by Alice. Alice, in turn, feels that she is overwhelmed with demands from both her children and husband, being the one who "everyone turns to for everything." She took a job several years ago, but the demands of her family "pulled her back." Alice decided then that when her youngest child was ten she would reclaim her "identity in the world." Alice feels like she is wasted at home, yet feels guilty about taking time for herself, feels that any extra time should go to her family, and has come to realize that she is repeating many of the same mistakes that her mother made.

Characteristically, Bryan has offered to quit his job or move or do "anything" so that she will be happier, but nothing has come of these offers. Alice does consider their sexual relationships to have improved in recent months: "now the children know not to open the door and now they sleep through the night." However, she also notes that "sometimes Bryan and I just fall asleep in the middle [of making love.]" Bryan wishes Alice would stay home more often, but he also likes her need for independence. Thus, the cycle continues, moving well beyond the confines of their bedroom, yet repeatedly moving back to the basic issue of sexuality, intimacy, and mutual commitment.

In reality, affection, shared interests and the capacity to honor and build on differences are at the heart of good relationships. Snuggling and other forms of physical affection and closeness may be just as important over the years as intercourse. The defining moments for a relationship are rarely based in sexuality, though often these defining moments are celebrated or most fully enjoyed through a rekindling of passion, sensuality and sexuality. Thus, to better understand the role played by sexuality in many enduring relationships, it is essential to appreciate the nature, variety and dynamics of the marker events that help a couple to define and redefine their relationship.

Key Points

Enduring couples:

- Express the importance of sexuality versus sexual intercourse in the history of their relationship.
- Describe sexuality in terms of very special moments together often not even involving sex.
- Treat sexuality as a meeting ground where mutual needs can be met.