

Chapter 9 Awe and Ecstasy: Honoring the Body, Soul, and Spirit in Sexuality (synopsis)

This chapter explores what it means to cultivate healthy sexuality in a context of wonder and gratitude—the Biblical response to nature. Having a healthy attitude toward sexuality is difficult for many reasons, one of which is our culture’s narrow focus and overemphasis on the *interpersonal* aspect of sexuality—loving relationships and sexual communication—while it ignores the *prepersonal*, *archetypal*, *personal*, and *transpersonal* dimensions. Eros is bigger than we are. If we allow it to be what it is, rather than confining it within our narrow goals and concepts, it has the potential to connect us deeply on many dimensions, not just to other people but also to nature, to our own souls, and to God. Letting eros be eros teaches us acceptance and compassion toward ourselves and others. If we define sexuality too narrowly, we end up demonizing aspects of eros that can enrich and transform our lives.

Prepersonal sexuality is eros as the creative force of nature, the material and animal dimension of human sexuality. We honor the prepersonal aspect of sexuality when we engage in sexual activity outdoors, enjoying the feeling of deep connection with nature. But even more fundamentally, prepersonal sexuality involves honoring and enjoying our own and each others’ bodies. Recognizing the contribution of sexual activity to physical vitality is important, but enjoying the simple sensuality of the body is even more basic. In modern America, many people are ashamed of their bodies and obsess over them precisely because they do not honor and enjoy them—obsession reveals a lack of integration. Perhaps we need more opportunities for social and recreational nudity, which can provide a healing experience of the unconditional acceptance of everyone’s body, regardless of its size and shape.

The *archetypal* dimension involves the collective, unconscious patterns of human sexuality, patterns that can only be recognized in stories and myths. Recognizing archetypal patterns in our own sexual lives takes us beyond our own ego and goals, and may take us beyond our society’s norms and ideals. Archetypes transcend personal history and culture and connect us with all of humanity. As Thomas Moore says, “myth teaches us to honor and respect feelings and actions that can easily be criticized from some more socially accepted point of view.”

The *personal* dimension of sexuality involves self-love, self-esteem, and personality development. Most of childhood sexual development involves the growth of the personal dimension, but its importance continues throughout life. We honor personal sexuality when we show respect for and actively explore sexual fantasies and masturbation, rather than treating them as sins, embarrassing annoyances, or unfortunate necessities. Conflicts in sexual relationships are sometimes conflicts between the personal and interpersonal dimensions; resolving these conflicts in a healthy way requires respect for the validity of both aspects of sexuality.

The *transpersonal* dimension involves spiritual awareness and healing; it may even open us to ecstatic transcendence of ego and body. Physical and erotic intimacy can help heal the rift between soul and body and can heal a variety of emotional and spiritual wounds, not just those

arising from sexual abuse. Eros can be a path to greater self-awareness, expanding our imagination and expressing the deepest desires of our soul; following eros can help us transcend the pettiness and selfishness of our ego. Awareness of the spiritual body (aura and chakras) and spiritual energy can be heightened during sexual activity. The spiritual practice of mindfulness—keeping your awareness in the present moment—is never easier than during sexual activity. And sex can be a trigger for mystical experience—the dissolution of the self into ecstatic union with everything that exists.

In short, interpersonal relationships cannot bear the entire weight of human sexual meaning. Treating all of the dimensions of sexuality with wonder and gratitude would make sex and relationships less stressful, reduce the level of sexual shame in society, and expand and deepen the meaning of our sexual experiences.