

## **Sex and Spirit: Bringing Back the Sensual Nature That Heals**

AASECT, Friday June 27<sup>th</sup>, 2008

Linda E. Savage, Ph.D.

The image you see is a 4,000 year old Terracotta Plaque, found abundantly in Mesopotamia. It is a portrayal of the Heiros Gamos, or Sacred Marriage and these tablets were believed to bring good fortune to their owners as amulets. The man is the consort to the High Priestess (or possibly a temporal King); she is the representative of the Goddess. The image is of lovers who are profoundly present to each other—he cups her head and gazes deeply into her eyes, one hand resting on her waist, waiting to be invited in. She embraces him with one arm and cups her breast, offering it to him with the other hand and though it is not visible in this slide, she is placing one foot over his.

It is this image that informs my work.

My own sexual healing experience began with a dream I had on the summer Solstice in 1979, in which I participated in this sacred sexual experience. At the time, I was visiting the spiritual community of Findhorn, in the far north of Scotland. All I knew then, from the dream, was that celibacy was not the answer and that my sexual energy was my life force. About a year later, very ill with Crohn's disease and just sprung out of the hospital, (improbably) I began a sexual relationship with a man that allowed me to heal spontaneously and avoid a colostomy. From that experience, I knew that our sexuality is both a healing energy and a pathway to raising consciousness.

When I researched the Goddess cultures, for my book, and read about the Sacred Marriage, I realized what I had experienced it in my dream. These cultures that honored the divine feminine, existed for over 30,000 years, and knew that sexuality was a life-affirming expression of the life force. In fact, sexuality and spirituality was never separated until it became split during the patriarchal era. Imagine living in a culture where sex was widely acknowledged as sacred. The ancient cultures understood that sexual pleasure was transformative.

The Sacred Marriage was one of the central aspects of the ancient celebrations surrounding the Solstices and quarter days. It was a sexual union between the High Priestess, who was the earthly representative of the Goddess and her consort. Later, with the new patriarchal cultures, the High Priestess enacted the ritual with the local lord or king. The rite revealed to the people the deeper mysteries of sexuality. The Great Marriage ritual was performed in a beautiful private setting, but the whole community participated in the processions, singing, and prayer that surrounded and supported the success of their magical connection. The powerful energy that the couple generated was released into the Universe to ensure the prosperity of the community and abundance of the land. It was also believed to connect the community with spirit: the source of life force energy in the universe.

What followed for the entire community was a whole day and sometimes week of great joyous celebrating—feasting, drinking, dancing, singing and open enjoyment of eroticism. The Beltane fires were lit at sundown and after many hours of celebrating and leaping over the fires, couples would melt away into the night to enjoy with each other a night of erotic pleasure that they knew was the best way to honor the Goddess.

The image of Goddess sexuality reflects this ancient erotic paradigm that integrates sexuality and spirituality. The uniting of sex and spirit is an ancient memory

that is now emerging in our collective consciousness. In my years of researching spiritual sex concepts in Tantra, Taoism, and in Quodoushka, Toltec, and Egyptian traditions to name a few, I found practices in common such as cleansing rituals, centering, preparation of sacred space, breathing techniques, aligning with the partner, visualization and sensing the body's energetic fields.

For me, this is the hope for couples seeking to enhance their long-term relationships. Many couples are thrilled when I speak of the possibility of having more options from which they can choose, beyond sex as rote release through the genitals. Fresh pathways begin to open up in their awareness.

I began my exploration into translating the common elements of spiritual sex into techniques and concepts that most people can understand from my copy editor's feedback. I had sent him my chapter on spiritual sex and he wrote back, in bold capital letters I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT! Now I could have just dismissed him, but I took it as a challenge. If I could be clear enough for this mainstream fellow, I was on to something.

My challenge as a sex therapist is to help mainstream couples understand and practice these additional levels of sexual experience. I use the concepts of spiritual sex with most clients even those who do not self identify as spiritual sex enthusiasts. To begin with, simply shifting out of the performance model into one of pleasurable erotic encounters is very uplifting. It allows couples to release projections and expectations that have been clouding their sexual experience.

**So take a look at your handouts and follow along as I explain this model.**

One of the reasons that it is confusing to most people is that there are at least three levels of sexual experience and one may be talking apples and oranges.

**I Genital Pleasuring** is mutual, consensual pleasure and relaxation, including playful self-expression. It is tension release through genital orgasm.

**II Conscious Loving** is the enhancement of partner commitment through conscious, loving communion. It includes the experience of the "valley orgasm" of continuing waves of energy flowing through the body. It is the heart level of sexuality where compassion and empathy lay the foundation for profound healing

**III Spiritual Union** is the cultivation of sexual energy to attain ecstatic states, and the transformational effect of these altered states of consciousness. It encompasses the experience of orgasm through multiple energy centers.

The possibility of Level II and III experiences offers a tremendous opportunity for exploration into new and somewhat uncharted territories for western oriented couples. It also gives them much hope for continuing to grow into new experiences of sexual pleasure, life-long. The expanded view of sexuality can be practiced at any age and within any functioning limitations.

Over the years of practice, it has become clear that the working model we use shapes our perception and drives the treatment interventions. I have found the following schema helpful because it moves from healing their sense of "broken," into heart level sex in relationships (and experiencing our sexuality as energy) and on to a vastly expanded perception of sexuality. It is meant to be an organizing model for clinical work. Most interventions that you already use will fit into the following areas and I will mention my favorites for each area.

These seven areas correspond to the seven energy centers of the body. The plus signs indicate the optimal desired result. This is not a model focusing on dysfunction. It is meant to be a useful working model for clinical settings, incorporating the methods you already use. It includes the vision of expanded, ecstatic, transformational sexuality as an option.

This morning I will be talking most about Communion, Truth, Perception and Transcendence. However, first I'll briefly mention the three areas which are the foundation of all the work with both couples and individuals exploring their sexuality.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Energy Center: Permission: Healing the Cultural Wounding**

As therapists we challenge the negative messages that are the source of our cultural wounding: wounding that nearly everyone has to some degree. By reframing the internal messages to include the right to enjoy sexuality and to make healthy personal choices, we make a difference in the lives of those who seek help.

Harville Hendrix stated that "all cultures are the governing of relationships." That is especially true for the governing of sexual relationships. Our culture is bound by fear of sexuality in many ways. Therapists offer a safe therapeutic container which allows individuals to move beyond negative cultural conditioning into positive, healthy attitudes. This is the function of giving information and accurate, scientifically based education, aimed at rooting out the internalized shame and blame messages. Careful history taking is a crucial first step. What follows is shifting their perspective and reframing the goals; from specific acts such as intercourse and achieving orgasms to simple, pleasurable touch rather than genital performance. This is Level I of sexual expression: pleasuring in a relaxed, mutually enjoyable and even playful sexuality.

One of my favorite techniques for healing the cultural wounding is a handout inspired by Marty Klein, called "Busting the Top Five Myths about Sex" which is a way to dispel common misinformation. They are a great way to add in any educational information that you would like to explain.

#### **Myth # 1 Couples who love each other should automatically have good sex**

There is an assumption that intimacy and sex always go together. I give couples the classic definition of intimacy: "The desire to know and be known by another," which means intimacy is not synonymous with sex. I also talk about gender based traditional intimacy differences, summarized from cross cultural studies. Males typically learn side by side intimacy from early male bonding which is activity based. It leads to viewing sex as something one does to feel bonded, whereas females naturally seek face to face ways of bonding which leads to the need for connecting before any specific sexual touching.

#### **Myth # 2 Other couples are having more and better sex than we are**

I explain the statistics that appear in the fourth paragraph of this article and especially the common phenomenon of the desire discrepancy stalemate which may effect over 75% of couples in long term relationships at some point in their lives. I also present the Pleasure Model. Which is pleasure is the goal of any sexual encounter, the vehicle is sensual touch and orgasm is multidimensional.

### **Myth # 3 Sex should be natural and spontaneous (the way it used to be).**

This idea is one that many of us secretly return to, the sort of “gold standard” to which all of our sexual interactions are compared. The recent discoveries by Helen Fisher that reveal the difference in brain functioning in the early stages of love help dispel this myth, since it is a real killer for enjoying encounters with our long term partners. I offer my couples a clear definition of healthy sexuality:

- The ability to receive pleasure and feel good about your own erotic sensations
- The ability to give pleasure and enjoy your partner’s responses and pay attention to what the partner wants without losing self
- The openness to new experiences and sexual possibilities rather than rigid routines

To help couples let go of this myth, I teach them to see themselves as creating a seductive setting together as a team—no blame. No one is responsible to make it happen for the other.

### **Myth # 4 It’s easy to tell who has more desire and who has less desire in a relationship**

I teach couples the difference between arousal (physical signs) and desire (a complex interweaving of mind, body and emotions). Gender differences in hormones are important to understand. Appetite sex is driven by testosterone, 10 times more abundant in men, whereas connected sex is often, but not always, more desired by women. The intent of a sexual encounter may differ between partners, since the desire to simply have an orgasm is very different than the desire to make love. Either partner may be interested in a more “gourmet” variety of sex whereas the other may be more into a “basic food group” approach to sex. Communication skills are crucial to help couples let go of prejudices and actively listen to their partner’s desires without judgment or reactivity.

### **Myth # 5 Low desire indicates some sexual abuse/high desire indicates addiction**

Our culture is very quick to judge anyone else’s sexual interests as outside of the norm, which can be very narrowly defined. Most of the time this myth is not true. However, if you uncover clear evidence of one of these problems, refer the couple to a certified and licensed professional in sex therapy. Two excellent sources of such therapists located in your area are the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors and Therapists ([www.aasect.org](http://www.aasect.org)) and the Society of the Scientific Study of Sexuality ([www.sexscience.org](http://www.sexscience.org))

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Energy Center: Trust: Securing the Attachment**

The second area of work is helping the couple develop a secure bond with a mature attachment. Here we are working towards healing the relational wounding from families of origin. Author and therapist Terry Real points out that all wounds are, in fact, relational. There have been controversies about which is more important for healthy sexuality in couples: increasing the security of the bond or developing more differentiation, and my position is that you need both. Part of the work is uncovering early attachment styles, still operating when the individual is under stress. For the sake of simplicity I’ve divided them into two types:

“I feel anxious that people won’t love me enough,” which is the **anxious attachment** where the partner experiences overwhelming flooding during arguments and “I feel crowded around people and often need space,” which is the **avoidant attachment** style where the partner becomes disengaged and emotionally shuts down during conflict.

For both styles, we must teach healthy methods of anxiety regulation by helping the individual recognize and calm the underlying fear that occurs under duress. Keep in mind that the tendency to either pursue or distance in a relationship is an attempt to handle the anxiety in the only way the person instinctively knows.

The foundational technique I use to establish trust is Active Listening, which at Level I, simply creates a safe container in which they hear each other and develop empathy, an essential skill for mature attachment. Recently I have used another technique:

*When flooded, the couple is to stay in each other’s presence rather than take the traditional “time out”, but they are to stop talking and simply breathe together for two minutes. Then they are to open their eyes and say only positive things for another two minutes. Once they feel calm, they can go back to active listening. I make a point to help them understand that anything said in a neuroceptive state of fear is useless. In a secure bond, new neurons can grow.*

The foundational sexual technique that reduces anxiety is Sensate Focus, a non-demand, non sexual touch experience. Here, each is learning to feel good about both pure giving and pure receiving touch without raising unmanageable anxiety. This is why it is important that no sexual touching is allowed. A second level of learning with sensate focus is to develop the awareness of readiness by staying behind the arousal curve rather than pushing for more specific sexual activity. For avoidant women this is critical and for men with rapid ejaculation it is very important as well.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Energy Center: Self-empowerment: Ensuring Good Boundaries**

Couples must have clear individual boundaries and ways to establish healthy differentiation. Each must be both *protected* and *connected* to have a healthy sexual identity, much like Robert Frost’s famous quote: “Good fences make good neighbors.” Especially with regard to sexual relationships, people often forget that “your partner is not you” and that having empathy for your partner is not the same as fusion. Many individuals assume their partner should know what they want at a particular moment and that he or she should fulfill this need effortlessly.

Dan Siegel in The Mindful Brain offers us a definition of integration, an important concept for healthy sexuality: it is the linking of separate things that operate as a whole in a given moment. This is the essence of differentiation. Terry Real teaches a simple hand exercise that I’ve found useful.

*Have each person hold one hand around their middle (this is the internal boundary that maintains a sense of self) and the other is held out, straight armed and palm up towards you. Ask them to listen to the words you say and either hold their outstretched hand firm, indicating that they do not accept what you are saying or give a “come in” motion, when what you say is acceptable. Give them a demonstration and then pick something, perhaps a bit exaggerated, that you know*

*they would find acceptable and then one that you know would be unacceptable. Then talk about how to apply this to boundaries in the relationship.*

Another self empowerment technique is one-way active listening, called the Inquirer/Expresser exercise by Ellen Bader and Peter Pearson. One partner will share their experience and the other will purely listen, reflecting what they hear without judgment and asking open ended questions such as “can you say more about this.” Healthy differentiation is the ability to stay in the tension of differing, continuing to practice self calming while staying connected. It is the beginning of true self disclosure, learning to tell truth about self (# 5 in the schema) within the presence of the other.

I often assign a guided imagery exercise called My Secret Garden which allows a partner with particularly diffuse boundaries to develop what I call The Internal Guardian Self. This helps create the “protected” part of the equation. It is like the hand in the previous exercise that is holding onto ones’ middle. [The text is available to download from my website [www.goddesstherapy.com](http://www.goddesstherapy.com)]

Another helpful technique is to have each partner separately list what they consider seductive and then share them at the next meeting. Since the impasse they bring to therapy is a “your way, my way” approach, finding the “our way” starts with brainstorming. When they are able to stay open and curious, they can create the integration with some coaching help from you. I tell them that this is not a formula but a starting point and the integration will emerge differently in any particular encounter.

#### **4<sup>th</sup> Energy Center: Communion: Love without Fear (of abandonment or engulfment)**

This is the beginning of Level II, where couple sexuality is practiced as conscious loving. It is heart opening in a psychological as well as energetic sense. The couple is creating the container to become conduits of loving energy. These concepts are taught in the esoteric traditions of sacred sexuality. It requires partners to shift into loving the essence or the spirit of their partner, not the outer layers of everyday, ordinary life. To begin with they learn to create sacred space together.

This exercise I call **Touching Hearts**

*After creating a safe and beautiful setting, the couple sits opposite each other in chairs, on cushions, or on the floor. For a few moments they may choose to simply breathe deeply and make eye contact, or to say a few words of appreciation for their partner. Once they feel completely relaxed, each partner places their right hand on the other’s heart, and then places their left hand over their partners’ hand, closing their eyes. With relaxed breathing, they are to focus on the warm feeling in the heart region. They are to imagine a warm sun, expanding to encompass their whole body and their partners’ body, and the whole space they occupy. This will take a few moments. When they are ready, they will open their eyes and look into their partner’s eyes and repeat the following words. First one partner will say the first phrase and then the other repeats the same phrase, until all three have been spoken.*

*“May you be safe,”*

*“May you be happy,”*

*“May your heart be filled with joy.”  
After breathing deeply for a few moments, the couple may move into  
holding each other.*

### **5<sup>th</sup> Energy Center: Truth: Listening and Self Disclosure Without Judgment**

The level II communication skill is inspired by the Mindful Meditation movement in the West. I teach couples to practice both two-way active listening and one-way, also called the Inquirer-Expresser technique by Ellen Bader and Peter Pearson. Since all meditation is the practice of being in the present moment on purpose, the communications skills deepen with this level II energy center. The listener focuses on being fully present in the moment and stays open and curious rather than reactive to what their partner is saying. The expresser practices self disclosure by paying attention to what is coming up for him or her in the moment. This requires developing the ability to go inside oneself, sense the emotions or thoughts and then share that information in the most truthful way, again without judgment. When the listener needs more information in order to understand the expresser’s meaning, he or she uses open ended questions such as “can you say more about that?” and “tell me what you mean when you say \_\_\_\_\_?”

The sexual technique at this level is quite similar. It is practicing being fully present and expressing one’s experience, needs or wants, in the moment. This takes a lot of skill, since our culture has many beliefs, all based on the performance model, about what “should” and “should not” be expressed during sex. Practicing the communication skills at this level is tremendously helpful. The kind of truth that is expressed connects us deeply to ourselves and our partner and of course it must always be tempered with kindness.

### **6<sup>th</sup> Energy Center: Perception: Creating our experience**

The easiest way to help mainstream couples understand that we can use our perception creatively, in order to have more of what we want (in any part of our lives) is to talk about the concept of mental rehearsal which is used at high levels of competitive sports. During mental rehearsal, brain imaging has demonstrated that our neurons fire in the same way as they would during an actual physical performance, when an athlete imagines him or herself going through each detailed moment of a competition.

Although we have a more complex set of circumstances with sexuality and we have a partner with their own experience, the concept allows couples to open up to creating new possibilities. At the very least, we know that the body has a magnetic field and that this field blends with the partner’s and can expand exponentially under the right conditions with sex; that is, with a consciously loving couple who have created a “sacred space” in which to connect with one another at a very high level. They are aware of the essence of each other, and have dropped the ordinary perceptions for the time being. This is the meaning of the concept of seeing each other as god and goddess. The expanded magnetic field they create can be imagined and taken in to replenish the life force of the individual. In addition, the individual or couple can actually set an intention and release it at the moment of orgasm.

This 6<sup>th</sup> energy center is where we enter the realm of magic. In fact, there are many practices, from esoteric sexuality traditions worldwide, that utilize imagery, visualization, shifting perception and so on to move the sexual energy into a much more expanded experience. One example is Egyptian Sex Magic, as it is described by Tom Kenyon in the *Magdalene Manuscript*. I don't usually talk about this level of experience unless the couple is really ready and may already have spiritual beliefs, meditation practices, and some esoteric training gives them a foundation.

This is the most fascinating area of exploration, which Westerners have only begun to comprehend. It is my own area of research and experiential learning and it is the hope for couples who choose to pursue enhancement into their later years because one can practice this expanded spiritual sexuality lifelong.

### **7<sup>th</sup> Energy Center: Transcendence**

This is the level of spiritual union, where sexuality becomes a pathway to ecstatic, altered states of consciousness. Spontaneous transcendent sexual experiences can and do occur and have been described in literature, often by spiritual mystics who are not with anyone, nor doing any physical touch, but have a rising of their Kundalini in an ecstatic moment. Author and researcher, Gina Ogden found that her respondents described their experiences as “feelings of oneness with the universe during orgasm, out of body travel while making love, weeping with the joy of sexual bliss, being enveloped with a loving light, touching souls with the partner.” My own direct encounter with universal healing energy I described as moments of boundless, timeless existence in light/energy. The common themes are: seeing extraordinary luminous colors, feelings of loss of the sense of a physical body and merging with universal energy. For those who are interested in this level III sexual experience, there are many possibilities for further training. Traditions such as Quodoushka, Tantra, Taoist, Toltec, Egyptian and Kundalini Yoga are available, as well as other spiritual pursuits.

It is my intention to expand our awareness of the deeper options available to us around sexuality. The Pleasure Model allows couples to move into a way of honoring each other, experiencing anxiety free sensual pleasure in a life-long connection that renews the body, mind and spirit. When couples are able to enliven their relationships sexually, it is magic, and their sense of joy translates into happier families, positive community involvement and transformative social action.

**Bio:** Dr. Savage is an AASECT certified sex educator, MFT and licensed psychologist. She has specialized in sex therapy for over 25 years. She is the author of *Reclaiming Goddess Sexuality*, which presents the pleasure model of sexuality and blends ancient wisdom with current clinical knowledge. [www.goddesstherapy.com](http://www.goddesstherapy.com)

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.  
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.  
This page will not be added after purchasing Win2PDF.