

SEX AND IMAGINATION

SEVERAL YEARS ago I attended a dazzling exhibition of the sacred art of Pompeii at the Dallas Museum of Art. The rooms in the museum were crowded, and at one point I found myself shoved up close behind a man and woman who were admiring the beautiful objects closely and having animated discussions about them. We came, the three of us, to a small sculpture of the Greco-Roman god Priapus. In traditional fashion, he was depicted as a short, fat, balding figure having an enormous phallus that curved up over his head. It was taller than he was by half. The woman laughed, not anxiously, I thought, but appreciatively when she saw it, while her companion looked embarrassed and ushered her quickly to the next piece, and our threesome was broken up.¹

I remembered reading that in ancient times a statue of Priapus was often placed in a garden, where sometimes it was used as a scarecrow to keep the birds away. I wondered if this man had

something in common with birds and felt the scarecrow power, forcing him to move away. Maybe he was lofty in his thoughts and tastes, while his companion was more comfortable with earthy matters.

As we have seen, sex is a great mystery of life that resists our many attempts to explain and control it. Along with money and death, it represents one of the few elements left in life that virtually pulsate with divinity, easily overwhelm our feelings and thoughts, and sometimes lead to profound compulsions.

Emotional compulsion is often regarded negatively as a failure of control or a sign of irrationality. We might see it rather as the soul yearning for expression and trying to thrust itself into life. Sexual compulsion may show us where and to what extent we have neglected this particular need. Compulsion asks for a response from us, but we might be careful lest we simply react to the felt need. Some respond by advocating "free love," as though the best way to deal with the compulsion were to give in to it literally. This is the way of compensation, which doesn't solve the problem but only places us at the other end of it. The soulful way is to bring imagination to sex, so that by fulfilling the need at a deep level, the compulsion is brought to term.

We may try to keep the power of sex at bay through many clever maneuvers. Our moralism, for example, helps keep us clean of the mess sex can make of an otherwise ordered life. Sex education tries to teach us to avoid "venereal diseases"—the pathologies of Venus—by placing sex under the strong, white, Apollonic light of science. Yet in spite of all our efforts, sexual compulsion interferes with marriages, draws people into strange liaisons, and continues to offend propriety, morality, and religion. Its dynamic is too big to fit into the cages we make for it.

We are in a difficult position in relation to sex: we believe it's important to have a "healthy" sex life, at least within marriage, and yet we also believe that the tendency of sex to spread easily into unwanted areas—pornography, homosexuality, extramari-

tal affairs—is a sign of cultural decadence or moral and religious breakdown. We want sex to be robust, but not too robust.

The man and woman standing in front of Priapus represent two common responses to sex: humor and anxiety. Sex is exceedingly human—bodily, passionate, often satisfyingly improper. Some theories of humor suggest that sex often provides material for humor precisely because it liberates us from the burden of propriety and the repression of passion. Sex also offers the rare gift of deeply felt, unreasoned joy, and laughter can sometimes be the expression of pure joy. On the other hand, perhaps because it is difficult to contain and mold into stable forms, sex can also bring with it considerable anxiety. Sometimes we laugh as a way of reassuring ourselves in the face of anxiety. It is the very potency of sex that suggests it is one of the most significant springs of soulfulness in modern life.

The Holiness of Sex

IN MY school days I was given two messages about sex: one, that it is holy, and two, that it is usually sinful. My father tried hard to give me a positive attitude about sex, and during a few of my adolescent years talked to me about it, with the best of motives and with utmost sensitivity, on every possible occasion. Yet, in spite of his caring and enlightened efforts to counter the teaching I got at school, I still felt guilty about sexual feelings and fantasies. This guilt didn't lessen the intensity of the erotic images that insisted themselves in my imagination, but it robbed them of some of their pleasure and made me uneasy in the presence of anything remotely sexual. The religious teaching I received painted sex as a holy part of creation—anything created by God, even sex, must be holy—but in all practical ways sex was presented as the absolute epitome of sin.

From my vantage point now, it appears to me that this splitting of sex into holiness and evil did neither element justice. I

could never feel the holiness in any other than an abstract theological approval of God's creation, and I also never truly appreciated the dark, destructive capacities of sex except as a source of personal guilt. If we can restore both the holiness and the real darkness—for paradox is usually a sign of the presence of soul—then we might be able more fully to enter the mystery that is sex, and find in it a genuine route to intimacy, both with ourselves and with others.

What does it mean "to enter the mystery that is sex"? It doesn't mean compulsion, although carefully following the lead of our compulsions could lead us to soulful sex. It doesn't mean withdrawing from sex in fear. We might ask ourselves in what ways we could respond more affirmatively to our own sexuality, to desire and fantasy. We could also look closely both at the obvious and at the microscopic resistances we feel in relation to sex. The point is not to become sexually liberated in a literal sense, but to recognize that the soulful life may be barricaded behind the walls of our resistance.

Sex asks something of us. It can be the means through which we allow the archetype of life to show itself, so that we live more fully and manifest ourselves more transparently. This demand is so central and powerful that our resistances to it are also strong—our moralism, indirection, rationalization, and acting out. It would help if we would stop thinking of sex as in the slightest way medical or biological. The whole sphere of sex—emotion, body, fantasy, and relationship—falls within the domain of soul.

To broaden our imagination of the holiness of sex, I turn once again to mythology. In Greek and Roman polytheism, interestingly, each of the deities is sexual in a particular way, showing us how sex is divine in as many ways as there are gods and goddesses. I use this word *divine* of sex as a way of describing its unfathomable mystery and its absolutely profound place in the nature of

things. A whole book could, and perhaps should, be written about the mythologies of sex; here I will give just three examples to suggest how such an approach can help us.

HERMES

The Greek god Hermes was known chiefly as the "guide of souls," but he was also a strong sexual deity. A *herm* was originally a pile of stones that rose up from the earth like nature's phallus, used by travelers as a guidepost. From a Hermes point of view, sex offers guidance toward soulfulness, especially toward the deep places of the soul where strong emotions arise. For instance, we might look closely at shifts in our sexual fantasies for signals of what is going on deep in the soul, as though these fantasies were herms showing us the way. Our usual tendency is to judge these fantasies, or to move quickly into either repressing them or acting them out; we don't think to take them as indications of movements in the soul. Yet it's quite evident that the soul has its own sexual poetics. Our sexual fantasies and curiosity, even our inhibitions and repressions, have far-reaching resonance and many levels of meaning. In sexual imagination the soul is alive and fertile, not only in relation to physical pleasure but as an expression of its own quickening of life.

Sexual dreams can also be seen as the work of Hermes. It's all too tempting to take these dreams literally, assuming that last night's dream of making love to my teacher means that I must be attracted to her in waking life. But dreams can also take the material of life and give it a context and dimension that place it at the very heart of our identity and at the core of our emotions. Each sexual dream offers a glimpse of our deep nature and fate. This particular dream could suggest that my personal fate is to be drawn to teaching, that there is an erotic magnetism at work between myself and education, or it could also allude to the learning that goes on in sex. Sex is certainly a form of education, which is

not the same as "sex education." Taken Hermetically, sexual dreams implicate all areas of life, while at the same time they hint at the innumerable ways in which sex gives meaning to life.

Hermes was known as the god of communication and connections, so we could also explore these more commonly recognized aspects of sex as well. Through sex we may be able to express feelings more revealingly than in language. As desire and pleasure take over in the rush of sexual feelings, we are unveiled in ways not possible outside of sex. Our partner can see us with a transparency uncluttered by ego and manipulation. In this way sex communicates who we are, in a seizure of imagination that is uniquely expressive and therefore powerfully Hermetic.

When we look to sex for hints at the meaning of a relationship, or as the expression of love, we are imagining sex Hermetically. Modern studies that explore the sexuality of language are also sniffing out the presence of Hermes. Not only is sex a language of sorts, language is also sexual. Poets know well that language is both erotic and genital. Wallace Stevens says, "A poet looks at the world somewhat as a man looks at a woman."² In *Love's Body*, Norman O. Brown describes the sexual nature of language: "The little word 'is' is the hallmark of Eros, even as, Freud said, the little word 'no' is the hallmark of Death. Every sentence is dialectics, an act of love."³

Every aspect of life has its sexual dimension, and sex in the strict sense gives rise to life's poetics, whether in the form of art—music, paintings, dance—or the intimacies of everyday life. When people say that they can express certain feelings and thoughts only through physical sex, they are describing the Hermetic capacity of sex to serve as intercourse in all senses of the word. As such, sex can bring magic into a relationship, and anchor it in a way that no amount of talking or doing things together can. On the other hand, because sex touches such deep places in the soul, sexual failure can be devastating.

The image of Hermes suggests that connections can be made between people in ways that are not reasonable and fully intentional. Indeed, sex is one of the means Hermes uses to make these magical relationships. The worst thing would be to replace Hermes by "using" sex for communication or by intellectualizing it. The only thing required is to be open to Hermes in sex, and let him do his work. We could develop an awareness allowing us to distinguish when we are manipulating and forcing, and when we are letting ourselves be revealed and communicated. This passive form, "being communicated," is a pious way of letting the god have his way with us. The best way is not to reveal ourselves, but to be revealed.

We might want to keep in mind as well that Hermes, noble guide of souls, was also a thief, a liar, a cheat, and a lusty philanderer. The magical power of sex to link hearts has a shadow side which we overlook at our own peril. We may be drawn sexually to people who in every other respect do not make good partners. The Hermes element in sex also leads to very dark experiences. I knew a quite innocent man who found sexual fulfillment only by having sex in dangerous criminal communities and settings. I've worked with several women of little experience in the world who have described an allure they felt toward men who were violent or were involved with crime. If we see this magnetism as a draw toward Hermes, we might be able to evoke him in his trickster aspect without exposing ourselves to the danger of his literal underworld stand-ins.

On the other hand, there is no way to enter soulful sexuality without being soiled by its Hermetic shadow. As we answer the call of the sexual spirits, we will likely find ourselves in one mess or other, but this fall into sexual darkness may not be a literal fault. It may simply signal that we are getting close to the soul, which in its Hermetic sexual expression is never fully clean or bright.

APHRODITE

Aphrodite is an obvious goddess of sex, especially of its alluring and seductive elements. We have already noted her important role in love. One of the Homeric hymns in her honor says, "That seductive face of hers is always smiling, always carrying its seductive flower." The hymn honors this important dimension of sex and the sexual nature of life itself. Aphrodite was known not only as the goddess of human love and beauty, but of the seductiveness and attractiveness of the world. When we are seduced to smell a flower or to watch a sunset, we have given in to the charms of this beguiling figure, and at such times we might reflect on the relationship between our own personal sexuality and sex in a much greater sense.

When our sexual thoughts excite us toward new liaisons and new experiences, we may consider honoring these thoughts not by establishing new interpersonal relationships, but by being in life more sexually. 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. But to an Aphroditic sensibility, they are of primary importance and deserve our sincere attention.

If it seems impossible to imagine seduction as a holy thing, try to imagine a world without it: 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. Teachers know the importance of presenting ideas in such a way that they are seductive. Advertising geniuses obviously know the particulars of an Aphroditic world well. All of this is Aphrodite's sexual domain.

By seeing the cosmic aspects of Aphrodite, whom the ancients also called Ourania, or sky goddess, we might break through some of the compartmentalization that attaches to our personal experiences of sex. She divinizes the mirror—vanity, and the pleasure to be found in cosmetics and fashion, ornament, and

jewelry. Of course many people have no trouble indulging vanity and fashion, but as a society we lack a full appreciation, especially in a public way, of these Aphroditic virtues. It isn't easy to find traces of Aphrodite in our modern cities—in our civic buildings or in the language of politics. Yet if we are not sexual in all of life, how can we expect sexual fulfillment in our relationships? We might also go a long way toward an ecological consciousness through a greater appreciation of the Aphrodite myth: we might take better care of the natural world if we could see her spirit in our hills and countryside. In a phrase that could serve as an inspiring mantra, Ficino said that it's terribly important to feel the "breath of Venus" in the world, for she is one of the primary sources of graciousness in this life.

A dose of vanity is a blessing from this goddess. It can motivate people to take care of themselves, to present themselves to the world attractively, and to become people of visibility and effectiveness. Vanity can feed fashion in a soulful way and motivate us to bring beauty and care to our homes and our persons. Obviously, when vanity is a symptom rather than a character trait it can render life literally shallow and superficial, but in that case the problem is not with vanity itself. Besides, excessive modesty can be just as narcissistic and equally unattractive.

Another easily overlooked virtue of the Aphroditic life is attention to adornment and decoration. As a people we have lost this simple aesthetic sensibility that many societies take for granted. Old machines and furniture are alive with decoration, while it is the very hallmark of late-twentieth-century life to use machines, utensils, and appliances that are sleek, gray, and decoration-free.

On a recent trip to Rome I had an opportunity to attend a *presentazione*, a public celebration of a poet who had just published a small volume of poetry. After a reading of the poems, three substantive minilectures by two professors, and some good wine and cheese, we examined the lovely old printing press on which the

poems had been printed. It was made of imposing cast iron, was a hand-operated machine, and was alive with decorations and animal motifs. The paper on which the poems were printed was also exceptional, thick and textured, so from the words of the poet to the physical object to the way it was publicly presented, the entire event demonstrated the possibilities of an Aphroditic approach to poetry.

Imagine computer terminals multicolored and supported on little animal feet. If that image is difficult to conjure up, then you know how far removed our boxlike machines are from the animated, sensual, image-filled mechanical paraphernalia of the past. When Aphrodite is evoked in such everyday objects and activities, life is given soul. Too often we think that the psyche is nourished only by means of mental analysis and personal behavioral changes, but as Jung said, soul is more outside than inside. We can care for the soul by eroticizing our lives and sexualizing our environment—invoking a blessing from the goddess who has always been both a scandal and a grace.

ARTEMIS

Another goddess, quite different from Aphrodite in that she is sometimes considered asexual, is Artemis, in Rome known as Diana. Although Artemis is a virgin goddess, she also represents a sometimes overlooked dimension of sexuality. We have already seen the story of one of her “daughters,” Daphne, being chased by Apollo, who is filled with desire for her. There are other stories as well of Artemis figures who are obviously sexually attractive and have to run away from their pursuers: Britomartis flees from the advances of King Minos, Atalanta runs a race hoping to achieve freedom from sexual entanglements. There must be something terribly alluring in these virgin goddesses to inspire such lust.

We might think of these virgin figures of myth as evoking our own modest, inexperienced, and innocent spirit, as well as the in-

tegrity of nature. The goal of some pursuers may be to spoil that innocence, while others may wish to claim it as a life companion, to learn from it and be affected by it. Many people seek out partners whose innocence is their most beguiling charm. Others choose to live as near as possible to nature, assuming that nature’s purity will maintain their own. Some people even like to make their sexual relationship virginal in some fashion. They may appreciate personal privacy and restraint in lovemaking, or they enjoy the eroticism that comes from sexual abstinence.

Chastity has a place in a sexual relationship. But we literalize the soul’s virginity when we polarize chastity and sex as two opposing ways of life, and not as two dimensions in a relationship. I would think that even so small a thing as the statement “I don’t feel like it right now” may be a visitation from Artemis and may serve a sexual relationship in its own way. Reserve, withdrawal, and withholding are part of the dance of sex. If they are seen only as a failure of sex or as an aberration, then the sexual relationship, perceiving Artemis as a threat, could suffer.

Artemis, the tall goddess, could often be found in the mountains. She has a high and exalted air, as do the Artemis elements in life, such as meditation, solitude, moral conviction, spiritual practice, and purity of life-style. We may glimpse this spiritual side of Artemis in our church spires. Near my house in New England a “peace pagoda” rests Artemislike on the top of a hill, surrounded by trees and accessible only by a lane into the woods.

During my years of university teaching I found that academic life had many Artemis qualities. The “ivory tower” of academe, like the goddess, prefers to look at life from a distance and to set a border around its campus, separating itself from the vulgarity of the world. A *campus* is a field or pasture—a typical Artemis setting. I was even once advised by an administrator not to get too involved in interdisciplinary studies because it was important to preserve the integrity of the traditional departments; apparently the commingling of disciplines looked promiscuous. And cer-

tainly any sign of intercourse between ordinary or personal life and pure study was met with the same "moral" dismay as any sexual misdeed.

Just because Artemis is pure doesn't mean she isn't sexual. Priests, nuns, rabbis, ministers, nurses, teachers—all people who engage in noble, spiritual professions—can be attractive to others precisely because of their purity. Sexual fantasy rises of its own accord in the presence of purity: not in compensation, but inspired by the special eroticism associated with Artemis.

We might reflect on some sexual difficulties as the symptomatology of Artemis. Sexual coldness and distance of a destructive kind could indicate a failure to respect Artemis necessities. If our sexual lives do not allow a sufficient degree of integrity, individuality, and self-containment, Artemis will complain, and she often complains with considerable ferocity. If our sexuality is a subtle mixture of desire and withholding, intimacy and distance, or surrender and self-possession, these paradoxical qualities may signal the soulful presence of Artemis spirits, which complicate sexuality in the most productive manner by heightening erotic tension.

In this way the cultivation of purity in life can enrich one's sexuality. It may not be mere prudishness or resistance to sex if a person is offended by off-color jokes or sexy magazines. Artemis retreats in the presence of casual sexuality, and yet she has a great deal of sexual pleasure to offer. Her retreat from life could be seen, too, as a way of drawing sex away from its literal expressions and into the realms of art—the Daphne theme—or into natural beauty. In her the more subtle forms of sexual pleasure find a home.

Imagination in Sexual Failure

TO GET to the soul of sex we have to take it as it is, to accept its power both to attract and to disturb, and temper the various means we employ to protect ourselves from it. I'm not saying

we need to act out any and all sexual fantasies that present themselves. Far from it: such acting out is also a way of avoiding soul. The person who knows only the compulsions of sex has never experienced its soul.

What if we expanded our hearts wide enough to contain the many emotions that form an aureole around sex? What if we embraced its anxiety along with its pleasure? I suspect that the anxiety around sex is of the same order as the apprehension we feel in the presence of anything that still has the breath of God in it, that has not been flattened out with conscious intentions and explanations. Fortunately, sex resists our strenuous efforts to bridle it and stuff it into acceptable forms. Not to run away from our anxiety about it may be a way of feeling the full presence of its mystery.

In ancient Rome people believed that Priapus, the god of sexual vigor and vitality, was also the god who visited in impotence. These two sides of sex—vitality and impotence—have equal legitimacy and importance, and both are divinely sanctioned. If we try to achieve one by defending ourselves against the other, we will never know the fullness of sexual pleasure. Not only the attractions and withholdings, but also the failures of sex can be given their place, if we are to draw close enough to sex so that it feeds the soul.

In our culture we automatically judge each and every failure negatively, and then we go to extreme lengths to find an immediate remedy. Any sex therapy that rushes to cure without listening to and honoring failure—dysfunction—plays into our unconscious values of nonstop success, performance, and good functioning. From the viewpoint of soul, failure to function is meaningful, worthy of our intense interest and study. Soul speaks through the chink created by dysfunction, corrects our Herculean willfulness, and occasions nourishing reflection. If everything were going well, there would be no need to stop and reflect on what we're doing.

From the soul point of view, sex can be even more revealing in

times of dysfunction and mess than in moments of well-being. We become desperate to examine our sexual lives, to consider past experiences and present attitudes, to wonder about what is happening. This is all food for the soul. Sexual difficulty may also ask that we stretch the imagination to consider changes the soul is asking of us. We may need a different sexual philosophy, new attitudes toward men and women, or to consider whether we're living out power problems in a relationship through sex. The possibilities are infinite.

The anxiety, guilt, confusion, remorse, and apprehension we may feel about sex can be seen as part of sexual life rather than as literal failure of it. This more profound reading of the Priapus paradox suggests that one gift of sex is a dissolution of the complacency, egotism, and heroics that can rigidify all of life, not just sexual experiences. Sex may then become a way to soul, rather than a confirmation of the status quo.

Sex is involved in every relationship and in every aspect of a relationship. When I am working in therapy with a couple having sexual difficulties, I do not automatically focus on the mechanics of sex or on obvious sexual issues, even if the couple insists that their problem is physical. Rather, I try to see what the soul is presenting in life in general, in the understanding that sex is always related to other aspects of life.

A man complained to me that he and his wife had lost interest in sex. I noticed that he kept blaming his wife for their problem. "She was brought up in a puritanical home. She's too uptight. She's too wrapped up in being a mother." He never ran out of reasons why his wife was the culprit in their sexual "dysfunction."

This kind of blaming may be a sign of avoidance of something within oneself. I asked this man about his own feelings and especially his dream life. The dreams he was having had no specific sexual themes in them, but they did reveal a significant conflict. In one dream he was getting dressed for a formal dinner when his

little boy ran by him, smearing chocolate ice cream on his jacket. The father, suddenly very upset, was concerned not to let anyone see this blotch on his coat.

I was interested in the dreamer's worry about having an image of cleanliness and formality that was spoiled by the child. The dream showed an interesting pattern—concern for image, a childlike smearing of that image, and anxiety about being seen in a messy condition. We talked at some length about a division within the man: wanting to appear adult and proper and yet feeling some childish undoing from within himself.

I was not surprised just two weeks after this conversation to hear that things had changed in his sexual relations with his wife. At least for the moment, they had taken a strong turn for the better. To the surprise of some people, a sexual difficulty can improve without any new understanding of the nature of the problem—simply touching, bringing to light, or stirring up the part of the soul that is involved can be enough.

Something in this man needed to be smeared by the child's own food, ice cream. Sex asks that we live joyously outside the perimeters of adult containment. We may feel soiled by the mess of this undisciplined world, which is sometimes that of the child, and yet it is healing. Ficino went so far as to say that all healing requires a movement into soul, which will be felt as outside the familiar structures of serious life.

If we define sex too narrowly, we may never reach the deeper and wider sources of sexual difficulty. A man and wife are in a sexual relationship all day long, every day: what happens in bed cannot be separated from what happens in life. It's no accident that the word *intercourse* means both physical lovemaking and intimate conversation.

The marriage bed is truly an altar on which many gods and goddesses are given reverence and ritual. Not all sex is Aphrodite, and even if her spirit is dominant, the rest of life is still profoundly affected by the devotion shown her in her special rituals

of the bed. Conversely, because sex is not just about the physical expression of love, but is an aspect of one's entire life, lovemaking can be affected for better or worse by other issues.

Sex, Aggression, and Eros

ANOTHER WAY to describe the emotional range of sex mythologically is to take note of the pairings we find in the stories. Venus has a special relationship to Mars, for instance, which is depicted intriguingly in Botticelli's famous painting of Mars and Venus. Edgar Wind, in his profound study of Renaissance imagery, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, traces the literary history of this tandem, the idea being that life is made up of the contraries beauty and discord. Marsian strife is softened, put to sleep in Botticelli's version, by the sweet but powerful spells of Venus. The seductress proves stronger than the soldier.

Modern psychological literature discusses this particular association in different language and tone, noting the importance for good sexual functioning of an aggressive spirit. There is no need, of course, to use the language of mythology. When a person complains to me about sexual problems, I may not think immediately of Botticelli, but I look for his or her particular tandems to sex. What are this person's fantasies in relation to sex, to relationship, power, self-expression, and so on, I wonder. In the case of the dreamer I just discussed, apparently the figure of the "smearing child" was important in his soul, and therefore in his sex life. Discussing sex, Patricia Berry says that married people usually lose the polymorphous quality of childhood sexuality, and therefore suffer from an excessively adult notion of sex. My ice cream man apparently needed a sweet, sticky, soiling brush with the child in order to recover his sexual capacities. His sexual feelings needed to be "contaminated" by childhood.

Another fascinating mythological partner to Venus is the god

Eros. In the ancient tale of Eros and Psyche, Eros is depicted as Aphrodite's son, although the story lingers on a long passionate kiss between them, suggesting that they are lovers too. It may seem redundant to say that an erotic life has something to do with sex, but it is still helpful to explore just how profound and far-reaching the implications of that connection can be.

Eros means "desire" and "longing." Most of us live our lives motivated by obligation rather than by desire and longing. Often, when a person comes to me complaining about some difficulty, I ask not "What is wrong?" but "Where is your desire?" I want to know about the condition of eros in this life, because the soul is affected much more by our treatment of eros than it is by the failure to do everything properly.

In *Eros the Bittersweet*, Anne Carson's thoughtful, precise exploration of eros based on classical texts in counterpoint with modern literature and philosophy, she summarizes her discussion of erotic longing with the conundrum, "All human desire is poised on an axis of paradox, absence and presence its poles, love and hate its motive energies."⁴ Eros is a mystery because it is never fully satisfied, and yet it is always finding satisfactions; it seems to be identical with love, and yet it has an essential relationship with hate. If we identify desire only in relation to what we want, then we overlook the fact that when we struggle amid feelings of hatred, there may also be an erotic element involved.

In his excellent book on Dionysus, Karl Kerényi, the historian of Greek religion, brings up another paradox: eros is the affirmation of life, and yet it has a close relation to death. Kerényi describes eros as a "guide of souls,"⁵ and in particular a guide of the soul to death. James Hillman long ago pointed out that this death does not have to be taken literally, but rather as the movement out of life as we literally live it and understand it, into a deeper perspective where the eternal issues of the soul are involved. In other words, eros leads us further into soulfulness, or in Hillman's lan-

guage, "I discover that *wherever* eros goes, something psychological is happening, and that wherever psyche lives, eros will inevitably constellate."⁶

In classical art, Eros has wings. He flies as the spirit flies, and he touches us as the spirit does. He may take us to places quite extraordinary. Any of us may be seized by a desire that is impossible to resist and yet moves in a direction that makes no sense or even counters our established values and ideals. But whenever life becomes erotic, the soul is involved.

When we feel stuck in life or in a relationship, we might look closely at the place of desire in our lives, even those places where it seems neurotic. Do I find myself fantasizing a trip abroad? Do my fantasies move in the direction of anonymous sex? Am I preoccupied with food or alcohol or some other drug? Am I reading compulsively? These are all signs of desire, and they can be read perceptively in order to find both where the soul is settling and where it is hiding.

Another way to include desire in our care for the soul is to allow it to have a principal place in the shaping of life. It is important not to overlook longings or dismiss them for practical reasons, and not to rely exclusively in our decision-making on reason or common sense, thereby excluding the more mysterious turns of eros. An erotic life is not at all the same as a rational one. Living erotically, we understand that desires are central to the soul's unfolding and should not be dismissed before giving them careful attention.

Kerényi offers an interesting image for the way in which Eros serves as a soul guide. He mentions a vase in the Naples museum on which is painted a puzzling scene. A winged young man throws a colorful embroidered ball to a hesitant woman. On the vase is an inscription: *THEY HAVE THROWN ME THE BALL*. Kerényi interprets this as an invitation to the world of the dead. Eros is the messenger, the go-between. In Hillman's reading of this

general theme, the woman is being enticed into soul through eros.

A woman once told me a dream in which a child tossed out a bright-colored ball that was covered with painted stars and other celestial bodies. The ball bounced along, leading the dreamer first to a house in which there lived an old, dominating woman, then to another house that was empty. The dreamer felt that she was supposed to enter this second house, but hesitated because she didn't want to trespass. Finally, as the dream ended, she went in.

There is a great mystery in this dream, made all the more interesting by the classical images Kerényi gives us. The bouncing ball, he tells us, can be an image for the seductions of eros. The dreamer's ball is also clearly cosmic—a sphere covered with stars—and in the early Greek Orphic religion, Eros himself was honored as a creator of the world, a demiurge.

Like a bouncing ball, there is often something playful about erotic experience. Invitations into deeper soulfulness often come to us in light, almost insignificant forms. This is an insight worth pondering: we are led profoundly into our soulfulness through the playful turns of life, and not necessarily or only in weighty matters. Heraclitus says, "Time is a child moving counters in a board game." How different this is from the fantasy that life is governed by a stern, weighty old man! In fact, Eros is usually pictured as an unruly adolescent, a young man wildly dashing from place to place, or as a child, always unpredictable and uncivilized.

I suspected that the woman's dream was extremely fateful, even though, or maybe because, it appeared so slight. In an essay on fairy tales Jung mentions the "pathfinding ball" that, serving as a magical talisman, sets the soul in motion. Joseph Campbell commented often on the tale of the Frog Prince, which begins with a little girl losing a ball that bounces into a pond. Campbell sees this slight occurrence as an example of a mythic "call to ad-

venture." "The adventure may begin," he writes, "as a mere blunder, as did that of the princess of the fairy tale; or still again, one may be only casually strolling, when some passing phenomenon catches the wandering eye and lures one away from the frequented paths." Again, one finds seduction an important theme in the soul's progress.

To live an erotic life is to follow the bouncing ball, to allow oneself to be distracted and enticed by something playful and child-like, or, to be more precise, by life itself in its playful mode. Our habitual seriousness can prevent us from seeing, and certainly appreciating, the erotic lures that come our way every day. Our medically minded seriousness about sex can also prevent us from glimpsing the cure of our sexual maladies and opportunities for expanding our sexuality. We may take it all too seriously, with too much adult knowledge and sophistication. Sex can sometimes be an invitation to the soul to come out and play.

Sex and Morality

SEX AND EROS are very closely allied, so that if the desire for a better sex life comes upon us, we might consider living more erotically in general. Of course, many people would find this suggestion objectionable, because we were brought up to believe that desire by its very nature is suspect and dangerous. It's better, we were told, to do what is right than to have what we want.

Although putting moral fences around sex is understandable, given its power and the strength of its shadow, the soulful aspect of sex can be deeply wounded by the wrong kind of moral sensitivity. If we place sex and morality in opposition to each other, then our morality will be defensive in nature, protecting us from the powerful lures of sex. But defensive morality is not the genuine article—it's self-protective and narcissistic, shallow and stagnant. We need a deep-seated, imaginative, constantly deepening moral sensitivity; defensive moralism not only thwarts the

soul's thirst for pleasure, it also precludes a truly guiding morality founded in wisdom. What if we didn't oppose sex and morality so stringently? What if we thought that the more sexual we are and the more erotically we live, the *more* moral our lives would be?

Let me give an example of what I'm talking about. A woman I worked with in therapy had been married for fifteen years to a man she truly loved. But she also loved another man. Let's call him Timothy. Early in her marriage she had had an affair with Timothy. She loved being with Timothy, but she also felt guilty about it. She had three children, and she couldn't stand the thought of betraying her husband and her family just so that she could selfishly have moments here and there of real sexual fulfillment. So she ended the affair.

A few years later, however, she realized that her marriage felt wooden and in decay. She had set aside her strong desire for Timothy with the idea that her marriage would be better for it, but in fact her marriage continued to get worse. She didn't want to get a divorce, she didn't want to live an empty marriage, and she didn't want to give in to her desire for Timothy. Understandably, she felt there was no way to resolve her situation.

Eventually, her desire won out and she started up the affair once again. She knew her heart craved the comforts of her relationship with Timothy, yet she still didn't want to leave her family for him. She loved her family and didn't want to lose it. This time, however, she talked to her husband openly about her feelings, and even though he tried every way he could to make her feel bad about what she was doing, in order to pressure her to stop and give him emotional relief, she remained in the complexity of her emotions. She knew from past experience that if she resigned herself once again to giving up her desire in favor of an emotionally and sexually empty marriage, she'd "go crazy," as she put it.

Both she and her husband were forced to look closely at their marriage and at themselves as individuals. As long as they tried to find a moral solution or an intellectual answer, they got no-

where. But when they began to talk without pressing for a solution, something happened that shocked them. They began to enjoy making love with each other more than in all the years of their married life.

This time the affair ended without resentment or regret. Of course, the woman had strong feelings of loss and some concern about how lasting the change in her marriage would be, but she also felt peace about her decision. Something strong and loyal in her wanted to preserve the marriage. Her husband, for his part, discovered some of the ways in which he had been keeping intimacy out of their relationship. Over a long period of time, he gradually stopped blaming his wife for all their troubles. He could even glimpse, though not really accept, the idea that the woodenness of the marriage drove his wife outside of it. Meanwhile, by refusing to compromise her deep need for erotic intimacy, the wife not only stayed faithful to her own soul but helped return soul to the marriage.

The currents of eros make their own claims. This woman didn't simply turn blindly to a new passing flirtation. She lived for a long while in the painful complexities of conscience and in the entanglements of her desires. Out of that cauldron she found a new way of being married, and although neither she nor her husband could explain all that had happened, they felt a genuine renewal of their love.

I don't mean to suggest that because the outcome was an intensification of marriage, the situation was therefore moral. Had she decided to go with Timothy, she still would have preserved her moral sensibility. What was central was her faithfulness to the competing demands of her soul. Many times during the process both she and her husband would have loved to find a solution, but they both knew the importance of remaining in the confusion until *it* revealed a way. This attitude represents a morality close to the soul, deeply embedded in life, fate, and emotion.

Soulful morality is almost always subtle, complicated, para-

logical, individual, and gradual in its unfolding. It takes a long time in some areas to discover what is right and wrong, how one should live one's life, and which values take priority over others. Those who live by moralism, as opposed to soulful morality, believe they know all the answers. They can make quick judgments about the affairs of others. Even intelligent, sophisticated people who don't consider themselves moralistic often become drawn into moralism in areas where they are emotionally vulnerable.

Moral reflection that respects the unexpected movements of eros can foster intimacy and sexual fulfillment. But moral positions that are chronically suspicious of eros actually breed sexual acting out, by repressing its important role in the dynamics of the soul. They create the very moral confusion they are trying to counter.

When moral sensitivity and respect for eros merge, the two are so close the result might be called "erotic morality." This is a finely tuned ethical sense that recognizes the fact that soul is frequently set in movement by desires that may be initially confusing, but later may prove to be all-important in shaping life for the better. This kind of morality is life-affirming rather than prohibiting, and respectful of eros rather than suspicious. It trusts desire, and therefore, paradoxically, it doesn't breed compulsion.

From the erotic point of view, especially if we see eros as a "guide of the soul," our culture's fear of sex and our anxious controls on sex are at bottom due to a mistrust of the soul. Soul is a generator of life, spilling imagination into a world that tries to keep itself stable and secure. Sex is always making new connections, filling fantasy with new possibilities for intimacy, unfamiliar and exciting emotions and sensations, and new ways of experiencing life. Our literalistic attitudes and our reductionistic, narrow readings of sex try to bridle it, attempting to halt its threat to the status quo by squelching it at the physical level.

This narrow view of sex can also turn marriage into an uninter-

esting arrangement, giving the illusion that being married carries with it the demand to repress the exogamous tendency of sex toward further connections. With a soulful, erotic approach to sex, marriage can be a perfect setting in which all aspects of sex come into play. A person can be chaste, lewd, Dionysian, child-like, maternal, Priapic, experimental, Daphnic, and even philandering (erotically loving many people) without acting out these wonderfully life-creating ways among actual people. It takes a robust imagination to invite eros into marriage, and it takes a poetic response to our own sexuality to make it soulful.

Morality can be a powerful force in living a soulful life, and it can help us sustain our loyalties and fidelities in relationship, provided it does not act as the enemy of desire and pleasure. As a promoter of eros, a strong moral sensitivity helps cultivate eros as a humane dimension of everyday life, and not as the destroyer of culture. Eros invigorates the forms by which we live, and in turn it takes on effective human shape and dimension. Morality might be defined in these terms as the imagination for channeling eros into workable human forms. Above all, it is a positive force, not a negative one.

Pornography and Relationship

IN DISCUSSIONS I have led on the theme of soul and intimacy, participants have frequently brought up the topic of pornography as a problem in their relationships. Obviously, it is an important issue, especially considering the role of the imagination in erotic life.⁸

It sometimes happens that one person in a relationship shows an interest in pornography, while the other is offended or at least disturbed by it. A person might think that if her husband is turning to pornography for sexual stimulation, there must be something lacking in her. A woman tells me, "I wish my husband

would find whatever he is looking for in sex in our relationship, not in a magazine or a video." A man says, "I guess I'm not what my wife is looking for in a man. She's interested in other men's bodies."

It's difficult to sort out issues surrounding pornography because in our culture response to pornography often divides into two extremes—compulsion and moral indignation. This split suggests that for us pornography is a problem, rather than an element integrated into everyday life. When we respond to *anything* with compulsion and moralism, we can assume that we haven't yet found the soul in it. We have yet to imagine it deeply enough to be free of either its compulsive lure or its frightening or repulsive aspect. In the case of pornography, we could look closely at our own repulsions and fascinations and ask with sincerity, "What is this thing doing in life?"

The fact that dreams are often sexually explicit suggests that the soul itself takes pleasure in pornographic images, that pornography is not just a personal problem, and that it may serve some significant purpose. Dreams are not fabrications of a neurotic mind; in fact, they seem so deep in our own natures, so primitive, that they show more directly than anything else, if sometimes obscurely, what the soul is made of. Jung once said in a lecture that dreams reflect certain tendencies "whose meaning embraces our whole life, or those which are momentarily of most importance." He went on to add a qualification that is important, especially in relation to pornographic dreams: "The dream presents an objective statement of these tendencies, a statement unconcerned with our conscious wishes and beliefs."⁹

Extremely fastidious people, proper in every outward respect, have told me dreams that are filled with sexual experimentation, impersonal or improper liaisons, and graphic lascivious situations, all often accompanied by almost preternatural degrees of pleasure. If we follow the idea that dreams indicate movements or

conditions of the soul, then we might ask what it is that interests the soul in pornographic images. What is the point of the pornographic imagination?

Dreams are an art form created by the soul for our own edification. We must read them poetically, as we would any kind of art. When a person dreams, as many people often do, that a tornado is approaching, he doesn't necessarily have to build a storm shelter in response. It's fairly easy to see that this tornado may be an image of some threatening "weather"—emotional, fateful, relational—that could cause havoc. In the same way, a sexual dream doesn't have to be seen only in relation to physical sex. More broadly, it may present us with specific images of desire, attraction, pleasure, connection, self-expression, or a whole range of other possibilities.

When we ourselves or someone close to us suddenly becomes fascinated with pornography, we might keep an open mind, and keep that mind poetic, in order to "read" what is going on. A person who has repressed his own desires and lived mainly from obligation might well spend his nights in rich sexual extravagance. I don't want to suggest that dreams are always a compensation or are opposite the stance we take in life, for the soul may also be taking a turn, becoming interested in another direction in life, which might be embodied in sexual fascination.

An interest in pornography—books, movies, music, shows—clearly shows the desire for some kind of increase in erotic life, and in particular for an intensification and broadening of the sexual imagination. When we find this interest blooming in ourselves or in someone close to us, perhaps uncharacteristically and surprisingly, rather than move quickly into judgment, we might ask what it is doing there. Could this sexual interest be serving some purpose? Renaissance medical books described Venus as one of the most moist spheres of life; following this hint, we might inquire into our dryness. Could this appearance of erotic fascination be a response to dryness of thought and living? The porno-

graphic imagination doesn't have to be justified, but it might ease our minds if we could find a context for it.

Our culture in general has difficulty with Eros and Venus, desire and sex. Our reactions as a society are often moralistic and repressive, an indication that we have yet to find ways to incorporate these powerful forces into our ordinary habits of life and thought. As individuals we are affected by the culture's impasse in this area, so that sometimes what may appear to be a personal problem may in fact simply reflect a larger struggle taking place in society. In order to deal with these things at the personal level, we may have to go against the prevailing sentiments of society, at least to some extent.

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 intense experience that can touch every branch of feeling and meaning, yet one we may never fully understand. It is by nature mysterious. For ourselves, when we are seized by a fascination with pornography, we may have no choice but to follow the compulsion, while observing it carefully. When it's our partner who is so charmed, either we may have to tolerate the compulsion, and help with conversations about its possible direction, or we may be so repulsed that we may have to find ways to protect ourselves, at least temporarily. This kind of compulsion can be a beast, as necessary as it may be in the life of the individual soul.

The Greek word *porne* (literally "harlot") was used as an epithet for the great goddess Aphrodite. This striking bit of linguistic history suggests that pornography is not only normal, it must have something valuable to give to the soul. We might think about positive ways to cultivate an appreciation for erotic imagery, and we might also recognize that our resistances to it could be either an important natural mitigation of the compulsion or a

fearful defensiveness toward a piece of soulfulness that asks us to become more complicated and flexible in our moral sensitivities. In our difficulties with pornography, both of these dynamics may play a role, and it may take considerable time for reflection and self-examination to sort them out. In any case, the goal would be a deeper appreciation of the erotic imagination, so that neither compulsion nor defensiveness would be the characteristic quality of our response.

Sex and Intimacy

THINKING ABOUT sex, we sometimes take either the position that it is entirely physiological or the one that it is primarily interpersonal. In either of these viewpoints, the soul of sex can be overlooked. Its soul is to be found in the imagination through which we experience sex, whether individually, interpersonally, or even societally. Each of us has a sexual history, stories, persons who figure prominently for good or ill, places, and events—some of them pulsing with emotion. We may also have strong sexual hopes and longings. We might regard all these images poetically, as creations of the soul aware that each may resonate on many levels. The memory of a pleasurable experience may carry longings about pleasure in life itself, or a painful memory may epitomize a more general disillusionment and hopelessness about joy, pleasure, and intimacy. The image of oneself as a lover, as beautiful or capable, may be wrapped up in these memories. Deeper still may lie fears of exposure, the old dynamics of family relationships, or even the difficult task of simply living a bodily existence.

The intimacy in sex, while always attached to the body, is never only physical. Sex always evokes pieces of stories and fragments of characters, and so the desire and willingness to be sexually transparent is truly an exposure of the soul. In sex we may discover who we are in ways otherwise unavailable to us, and at the same time

we allow our partner to see and know that individual. As we unveil our bodies, we also disclose our persons.

It makes sense that such vulnerability requires inhibitions of all kinds. Part of sexual intimacy is protection of the other's inhibition, for that reserve is as much an expression of soul as is the apparent willingness to be exposed. It makes no difference whether the inhibition seems neurotic or even psychotic: it must be honored if soulful intimacy is to be maintained. It is not "abnormal" for a person to feel unusually reticent about physical and emotional exposure. Nor is it "abnormal" for a person to enjoy the exhibition of their sexuality. Exhibitionism and frigidity are states of soul. In the context of a relatively puritanical society, all robust sex may appear quite abnormal anyway.

Sexual intimacy begins with acknowledgment of and respect for the mystery and madness of the other's sexuality, for it is only in mystery and madness that soul is revealed. I'm referring to platonic madness, of course—the soul's natural expression that almost always appears deviant to normal society. At times we may have to protect ourselves from another's sexual confusion and acting out, but if we want an intimate relationship, we will have to find it in ourselves to create a place for the other's sexual fantasy. In extreme instances we may decide that we can't tolerate a particular erotic world, or we may realize that some sexual thoughts are dangerous for us. In most cases, though, we may want to try to stretch our imaginations and sensitivities, acknowledging that the soul shows itself in each of us differently, and particularly in the precise directions of sexual fantasy.

To find sexual intimacy we may also have to acknowledge that sex is often wounded. Our great stories often give us images of sexual wounds—Odysseus's scarred thigh, the lanced thigh of the Fisher King of the Parsifal story, Lady Chatterley's impotent husband, Emma Bovary's obsessions. Soul pours forth from our wounds in general; and the soul of sexuality in particular often enters through an opening made by sexual wounding. We can learn

to see that the places of our sexual punctures and violations are areas of potential intimacy between us and those we love, even though on the surface they may seem to be precisely the areas of mistrust. In this it is terribly important to resist the modern tendency to champion health and wholeness. All of us have sexual wounds. It does no good either to wallow in them or to deny them, but it may be good for the soul of a relationship to give them a place—protecting them, not trying to figure them out and solve them, giving them the privacy they demand, and yet also inviting them into our most vulnerable conversations.

Current talk of sexual woundedness often turns to cause and effect. We want to know *why* we experience certain difficulties, and we would like to find someone to blame for the problem. Another, more soulful approach is to resist the temptation to stroll down the road of causality, which never leads to soul, and instead open ourselves to the thoughts, feelings, memories, and longings that are baked into sexual fear and regret. Sex then becomes a means of soul-making, a channel to the erotic caverns of the heart.

A few lines from a poem by Mary Mackey point to the difference between the soul's intimacy in sex—intimacy defined as "the most within," which happens to take the longest—and the quicksilver spirit of a passing sexual encounter:

love comes from years
of breathing
skin to skin
tangled in each other's dreams
until each night
weaves another thread
in the same web
of blood and sleep

and I have only
passed through you quickly
like light

and you have only
surrounded me suddenly
like flame¹⁰

This is not to say that there can be no soul in a casual, quick sexual meeting, but that one way sex weaves people into soul is through the repetition, the mere sleeping and dreaming, and the years of breathing skin to skin. These are part of sex, and they are what give the soul its invisible threads of intimacy. Often, the poet says, we focus only on the light and the flame, wishing for the exceptional, overwhelming "experience," whereas the soul's need for sex may ask for a slender spider's web of connection and the steady weaving together of hearts and skin.

Sex has long roots that reach deep into the body's quick and far into the feelings of the heart. While sex is therefore tender and sensitive to invasion, it is also profoundly involved with the soul. Sex is the soul's limpid mirror, its litmus, and its gesture. Sex takes much of its emotional power from the vast amount of soul in its fantasies and in its touches. We can exploit sex, manipulate others with it, use it with fierce aggression, hide from it, misread it, and indulge excessively in it—these are merely means of struggling with its potential soulfulness. The soul of sex has the power to evoke relationship, to sustain it, and to make it worthwhile. As with all things of soul, we are asked to stand out of the way and be affected by its power to quicken life and to transform us from practical survivors into erotic poets of our own lives.