

Strengthening the Heart of Relationship

By Selah Martha, MA

I often see couples who present the following scenario. The man is grumpy because they never have sex. The woman is irritated because the man just wants sex and never shares anything about his interior life. I am using straight gender terminology here, but similar polarities occur in same-sex couples. Or, in straight couples, but with genders reversed.

The partners are mad at each other and in a stalemate, each person getting lonelier and more frustrated. The relationship seems impossible, and drains energy rather than supplies it. The woman says, "If we had emotional intimacy, then I could trust you and let go into sex." The man says, "If we could just have sex, then I could trust you and open up more."

(Both partners are right. The tenderness and courage of the heart connection, and the passion and animal comfort of sexuality, are equally essential to fulfilling partnerships – at any age.)

Imagine a second scenario: Each partner communicates generously about how it feels to go through life; they make their steps clear emotionally as well as mentally. The two individuals are like two poles of energy, with a strong circuit of sharing, respect and creativity running between them. This circuit, consistently tended, holds a deepening love and potency, which is available for work, spirit, or sensuality. Sex is heartfelt, physically satisfying and energizing. The demands of life become interesting challenges to meet creatively, together.

Here are some suggestions for transforming the first scenario into the second:

MEN: if you do not have a rich vocabulary to describe your interior experiences, develop one. Don't wait for the woman to teach you – go after this training for yourself. Women need to know where you *are*, emotionally as well as physically. This psychic-location creates a sense of security and relatedness which women need in order to trust and go deeper. Find out more about who you are as a man. Learn to speak from your heart and from your wisdom.

WOMEN: Remember that men are not women; you will not have the same experience of being fully understood as you have with your girlfriends. You *can* have the experience of being deeply respected, loved and served if you concentrate on your own dignity, grace and self-knowledge. Find resources to affirm your identity as a woman. Don't wait for the man to awaken your fire-power or initiative. See his potential and call to his highest integrity, but let him bring forth his gifts in his own way.

BOTH: get more education about relationship as a work of art and science.

Communication: Find books, workshops, courses, retreats about different communication techniques. There is always more to learn, and it is essential that you keep discovering yourself and your partner in new ways. Any time you think you know all about your partner, you are generating stagnation in the relationship. Stay curious! Intimacy on all levels can be awkward; it is not about fusing; it is about appreciating each other across the space between.

Don't over-analyze or process exhaustively. Set up times to pay attention to the relationship, to share and discuss or confront an issue, and then allow the unresolved matters time to percolate. Pay attention to what shifts occur non-verbally during percolation, and then make sure you revisit the matter. Find a balance that makes for a regular depth of sharing mixed with time to integrate.

Sexual Play. This culture actively promotes body amnesia, and we all forget about the spectrum of physical affection and contact which make for true eros, the embodied pleasure of this physical world. There are so many ways to play with nurturing touch, sensuality and sex energy, the possibilities are truly endless. Let go of your same-old formulas and create a sense of adventure. It's *all* tantra. Try having a heart-on. Play with the energies of receptivity and penetration on every level of being, regardless of your gender. Make up some new games.

In terms of sexual activity, there needs to be more learning about women's bodies and the terrain of female arousal. In general, neither women nor men have adequately explored this landscape. In the erotic temple traditions, it is known that if the woman is held fully, she can open her body to an infinite space. Then both people can rejuvenate their souls within the universal source which they have accessed. This does not have to take hours, but it does require subtlety and skill, as does playing a Stradivarius.

Spiritual work . In any long-term relationship, the spiritual work creates the most profound upheavals and requires a commitment akin to the deepest meditation practice. In my work, I perceive forms which arise in the space between the partners, like watching a third weather system take shape when two weather systems meet. This third weather system then affects the two individuals, and might be experienced as gratitude and love, peace, creativity, power struggles, trust issues, or the longing to break free from the relationship. Jungians would say these forms arise from the intermingled unconscious fields of the individuals. Some would call them karma.

Wherever these "third weathers" come from, it is essential that the individuals be able to witness them and find a way to hold a space of goodwill for each other even when the "third weather" is bringing up emotions of fear, anger, or hopelessness. The work is to confront your own internal shadows and find your way back to love and connection with yourself as home base. From *there* you reach out your hand to your partner and find a new way to be together. And then you reach again, in a new way. And again.

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