Sexual and Emotional Intimacy: A Need To Emphasize Principles

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I would like to make it very clear at the outset—in fact, I must make it clear—that in discussing the topic of sexuality, I am speaking for myself as an individual and not for the Church. As you know, the Church has not issued a global statement on sexuality; were such a pronouncement to be made, I would not be its spokesman.

With that understanding, however, I would like to explore some ideas about sexuality with you in the context of our common membership in the Church, our joint commitment to the principles of the gospel, and our pursuit of both spiritual and intellectual excellence as professionals.

To provide a context for my comments, I would like to summarize a lively and provocative session dealing with the topic of sexuality which I attended last spring at the Mormon History Association meetings in Rexburg, Idaho. Harold T. Christensen of Purdue presented the results of a 1978 study of premarital sexual attitudes and behavior among Mormon and non-Mormon students, compared to the equivalent data for 1968 and 1958. He concluded that sex norms for Mormons are conservative and resistant to influence from secular values, primarily because of Church teachings and attitudes, and that the distance between sexual attitudes of Mormons and non-Mormons is increasing. He also found that Mormons who were sexually involved before marriage felt more guilt than non-Mormons and were likely to leave the Church because of their negative feelings.

Marvin Ryting of Indiana University, Purdue at Indianapolis, and his wife, Ann, presented another paper in the same session analyzing a random sample of articles from the Improvement Era, Ensign, New Era, Instructor, Church News, and General Conference talks from 1951 to 1971 for references to chastity. They found that the admonitions to be chaste increased fairly steadily, starting by the mid-sixties until, in the seventies, the increase was "dramatic." Statements about chastity also became more explicit. "In the fifties, it was most common to make veiled references to chastity or at most to make very general statements about being clean and pure and chaste or saving yourself for marriage." The sixties began adding admonitions "about what not to do. In the seventies most of the admonitions were specific." Furthermore, during the fifties, "chastity was generally presented in positive—almost romantic—terms as the best way to be happy and to make others happy. More recently, the focus has been on the negative reasons to avoid sexual activity." The talks also began showing great concern with the immorality of society as well as with personal sexual morality.

The authors summarize their findings by characterizing the message they think Church members receive: "Social control has broken down and individual self-control is being rejected...In order to control our sexual urges, our best defense is to avoid sex as much as possible...In the midst of our deep concern to avoid evil, there is little room for sex to be a beautiful and natural expression of affection."2

Without any data to confirm or refute the Ryting study, I wish to share my personal impression that the concern for sexual misconduct has indeed intensified in public pronouncements and that the General Authorities have been faithful in their duty to define sin and describe its painful consequences. At the same time I have been in a position to have had more private consultations on the subject with some of these Church leaders and these experiences have left me with a feeling that they have a very positive attitude and stance toward the broader issue of sexuality. If we assume that statements made in a context of "misconduct" are representative of broader attitudes, we may be making unsound conclusions.

The commentator on those two papers, Marybeth Raynes, a marriage counselor and clinical social worker with Salt Lake County Mental Health, West Side Unit, observed that Mormons are frequently placed in a "double bind: On the one hand there is a stated positive goal of happy marriages and happy people with the positive theological stance toward eternal sexuality (eternal lives in eternal marriage). On the other, is a negative approach to teaching that goal. Most essentially, this is a means and ends problem. It is impossible to achieve a positive end using negative means. Knowing what not to do is not very helpful in trying to decide what to do."

She shared with the audience a number of suggestions


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she thought helpful: The first was "that the process of teaching, discussing and exhorting about sexuality (should basically) change from a negative to a positive one. The means and ends must match to increase the likelihood that members of the Church can gain the goal of happiness or eternal lives." She gave an example. When a child is told, "Don't spill the milk," he must "understand and be able to image the forbidden behavior...before (he) can imagine the absence of the action. However, if a person is told, 'Hold the cup firmly and bring it carefully to your lips,' only behavior wanted is called to mind." Marybeth then said, "In my view, translating all of our injunctions about sexuality in the moral code into positive phrasing and meaning will result in more willing obedience with (perhaps) fewer negative...effects."

Because of our increasingly unique religious value system as a people and a culture, we're accustomed to hearing sexuality talked about in terms of negatives and prohibitions ("Thou shalt not commit adultery."") "Their whoredoms are an abomination unto me"). While these are important there is also reason to give equal time to these very activities of eating and drinking--common, ordinary, daily--through which we participate in the sacred ordinance of the sacrament. In much the same way, I believe, there can be something sacramental about the sexual relationship between marriage partners. As Elder Boyd K. Packer says: "In marriage all of the worthy yearnings of the human soul, all that is physical and emotional and spiritual, can be fulfilled.") "This power (of creation) within you is good. It is a gift from God our Father. In the righteous exercise of it, as in nothing else, we may come close to Him."

As I thought more seriously about the profile of the sexually well person, I found myself recalling an influential essay by David Wulff that I had encountered at the University of Michigan. He noted: "In profoundly healthy people...sex and love can be and most often are perfectly fused. (They) tend not to seek sex for its own sake, some preferring to give it up for the time being when it comes without love and affection. Sex seems to be less important to these people because of their enjoyment of the fulfillment of higher needs."

As Wulff has pointed out, the sexually well person appreciates his or her sexuality, rejoices in it, and is fulfilled by it, but, if I could paraphrase his idea, is not defined by it. In other words, the sexually well person gives his sexuality an honored place in his life, but balances and controls its expression with other values and principles. (In the discussion that follows, I will use the feminine pronoun; the concepts apply to men as well, of course.)

I think to the extent that the sexually well person accepts and appreciates her sexuality, it would become a force that made her relationship with herself, with her spouse, and with her God better, stronger, and more binding. In other words, sexuality would not be an unacknowledged element in a person's life, something she tried to ignore about herself, something that was present but not talked about in the marriage relationship, or a part of one's life from which God was excluded. It would be prayed over and for. In fact, I

3. Marybeth Raynes, "Response to Harold Christensen and Ann and Marvin Ryting’s Paperis"), Mormon History Association annual meeting, 1981, typescript, pp. 5-7, 9-10

became convinced that the dominant attitude of the sexually well person toward her sexuality would be gratitude. Let me share some thoughts with you about what I mean:

1. The sexually well person would feel gratitude toward her own body for its ability to respond to pleasure. I think it's important to make the point that someone who is grateful for her body respects and appreciates it. She does not deny it, punish it, or ignore it. On the contrary, she pays proper attention to it, and welcomes appropriate opportunities to understand its possibilities and potentialities.

2. The sexually well person would feel gratitude to her husband. The possibility of loving a well-beloved other should be a tremendous source of happiness, especially since it is mingled with the realization that our own fulfillment has been made possible by that same spouse's desire to give pleasure as well as receive it. Related to this, and I think it is fairly obvious, there is a sense of a unique bonding created by that sexual union. We break bread with many people. We work on different projects with many people. We even share our hopes and fears with many people, though certainly not to equal degrees. Though the idea is losing popularity in the culture and society around us, one of the characteristics of a healthy marriage is its sexual fidelity—the luxuriant certainty that only the two of you know and understand that part of the relationship, that only the two of you share that activity, that pleasure, that learning and loving.

3. The sexually well person would also feel grateful to God, not only for the blessing of a physical body, but for knowing and loving another person, and, in a temple marriage, for the sealing ordinances that make the possibilities of that union extend beyond death. In addition, just as sexual activity can enhance our respect and love for our own bodies and can increase our loving knowledge of our spouses, so our sexual activity can increase our love, reverence, and knowledge of our heavenly parents. Obviously much of our mortal probation is designed to help us develop godly attributes by giving us opportunities for growth. We are used to thinking of service, of charity, of missionary work, of patience, of forebearance, and forgiveness as such opportunities. I would like to suggest that another such opportunity to understand godliness occurs in the cherished privacy of our most intimate relationships as husbands and wives. And to the extent that we perceive it as such, so it is.

Now, just speculate with me for the moment. If our chief attitudes toward our sexuality were respect, appreciation, and gratitude instead of fear, guilt, or perhaps anger, what would we teach to ourselves, our children, or our clients? How would we reteach concepts that may have been badly learned in the first place, and how would we go about healing some of the wounds left by damaging experiences that people have had up to this point? And how would we be sensitive to members of the Church who do not fit easily into the categories of premarried youth and married people who have sexual access to each other? Here I'm thinking of the physically handicapped members who need help in working out the sheer mechanics of the sexual relationship. I am thinking of older, single people who, unlike teenagers, need to cope with long-term frustrations, fears about diminishing fertility and potency, and the need to establish a repertoire of ways to communicate affection physically but not sexually. I am also thinking of the large population of divorced and widowed Mormons, who have the memories and the desires of married people but not the lawful means of gratifying all of those feelings.

For one thing, I suspect that we would want to give at least equal time discussing the positives as well as the parameters and limits, or "thou shalt nots." For example, my wife and I have thought seriously and prayed earnestly regarding teaching our children about their sexuality, particularly as they approach adolescence. Taking the positive stance I'm suggesting has meant more than simply telling them to stay out of the back seats of parked cars. We feel it important to discuss how they feel about their bodies, share our own feeling of gratitude for ours, and suggest some appropriate ways—given age, maturity, and relationships—that they can express their own sexuality. Again, despite the negative models abundant in our society there are still positive models both within and without the Church for our children to look at, think about, and talk about.

We want our children to be proud of their bodies. We want them to know that just as their hands and minds can do wonderful things, so can their sexuality. We want them to understand the preparatory changes, both physical and emotional, as being both important and natural developments.

We also want them to understand positive reasons for waiting and for avoiding experimentation. We want to talk about self-control and fidelity to an as-yet-unchosen mate. We ourselves want to provide positive models for thinking about, talking about, and acting on our sexuality. We believe that our example needs to extend to positive speech as well as avoiding vulgarity or crudeness. We want them to understand that the sacredness of sexuality and the sacred use of our bodies is related to our eternal destiny as gods and goddesses and that we will understand that sacredness as we understand more and more about the plan of salvation and exaltation. But we also want them to know that sexual activities, as well as other dimensions of a marriage relationship, have problems to be worked out.

I suspect that we would want to emphasize the holiness of sexuality and eliminate some of the mysteriousness which makes it frightening and tempting. It would not be something that separates us from God, but something that links us to him. One of the things I noticed as a teenager is that all of the descriptions of sex as "sacred" didn't seem to relate meaningfully to my own barely controllable urges. How could something so powerful and exciting be sacred? I frequently solved the dilemma by deciding that I didn't fully understand what sacred meant and would simply feed bad about those feelings. However, for some, guilt may prevent sharing feelings about sexuality with the
TOWARD A SYSTEM OF ETHICS AND DELINEATION OF PRINCIPLES

As a Latter-day Saint, I think it is important to begin a discussion of sexual morality by understanding how sexuality is part of our total theology. We need to emphasize not just the surface meaning of those scriptures about purity, but the insights they give us into the eternities. I was deeply moved by reading President Romney's message in the September 1981 Ensign on the subject of chastity. Even though it was primarily directed toward the young, he started me thinking with his statement: "I can think of no blessings to be more frequently desired than those promised to the pure and virtuous. Jesus spoke of specific rewards for different virtues, but he reserved the greatest, it seems to me, for the pure in heart; 'For they shall see God.' (Matt. 5:8.) And not only shall they see the Lord, but they shall feel at home in his presence."

Here is his promise: 'Let virtue garnish thy thoughts unceasingly; then shall thy confidence wax strong in the presence of God.' (D&C 121:45).

I have pondered that scripture and the broad meaning of virtue as the word was defined in the 1828 dictionary to which Joseph Smith would have had access: strength, moral goodness, excellence, and efficacy. The magnificent revelation on the nature of priesthood in the rest of the 121st Section, together with the Sermon on the Mount also provide for me a fruitful place to begin understanding principles of sexuality.

So I prefer to begin with the scriptures and explication of principles rather than making a laundry list of "acceptable" sexual practices. I think I understand why Church leaders have chosen to be selective in what they say about sexuality and why they have generally spoken out only on subjects where they have felt compelled--in specifying the areas of behavior that would separate members from the Spirit and jeopardize their membership in the Church. With that in mind, it should be clear I am not recommending that every denunciation of sexual sin be paired with ecclesiastical endorsement for a permitted activity. I feel that the focus on practices, whether positive or negative, will simply raise more and more questions until the principles by which questions can be resolved are also taught.

A young woman of my acquaintance asked, "If it's all right to hug standing up, is it all right to hug lying down?" The question obviously is not the practice of hugging at all, but the principles that would govern such a decision.

In Marybeth's response that I've already referred to, she called for the creation of a system of ethics--those principles I'm talking about--from which an individual system of morality--or practices--would grow. As Latter-day Saints, we are in the somewhat unpopular position of believing that some types of sexual expression are wrong--for example, homosexuality or extra-marital involvement are wrong, offensive to God, and damaging to our relationship with the Spirit and each other--not just wrong if someone is hurt or wrong when the results turn out badly, but just plain wrong.

However, our very clarity in describing these offensive types of sexual expression may have led to the paradoxical situation that we know what's wrong much better than we know what's right; hence, if something is not on the prohibited list, we sometimes wonder, or have others ask us doubtfully, "Are you sure it's all right to do such and such?" or "What is the Church stand on such and such?" As Marybeth has pointed out, having a clear consistent system of ethics would eliminate the need for mentally or literally thumbing through the handbook, either for ourselves or others.

I do not consider myself prepared to set up such a system of ethics, but I'd like to continue, in the same spirit of exploration and tentativeness with which we began this discussion, to suggest some possible directions. I have extracted from David Wulff's essay some principles that would be relevant in delineating a system of ethics:

1. "The integrity--the wholeness and soundness--of persons, including ourselves, is something inviolable, something we must cherish. Persons should never be used for ends, including one's own, for to use another person is to make him into an object and thereby violate his personality. And when one violates the integrity of another, he simultaneously violates his own." In other words, respect for integrity is a key principle that must be considered in the development of any relationship.

2. "To express oneself sexually in a personal and responsible way with another, (one) must know what the meaning and result of that expression will be for the other; (one) must know how the other will experience it." Or, sensitivity and empathy are as important as basic physiological and psychological information.

3. "No sexual act is... (exclusively) sexual in nature; every act reflects other needs and values, and thus the way one expresses himself sexually tells us a good deal about the kind of person he is... And of course, 'sexual expression' includes the entire gamut for embodying one's manhood or womanhood, from the most obvious--sexual intercourse, for example—to the most subtle--the way one dresses or speaks, the qualities to which he responds in others, the profession he chooses, and so on."

4. "Sexuality should be integrated... into personality" yet powerful forces in our society "encourage the sexualizing of all of life. Rather than helping men and women to discover the depths of human potentiality, they encourage obsession with the surfaces created by fashion and the worship of youth..."

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8 Marion G. Romney, "We believe in being chaste," Ensign, September 1981, p. 4.
11. Ibid., p. 11.
12. Ibid., pp. 11, 12.
culture which knows a great deal about sex but very little of sexuality." There is an important distinction between sex--something that one uses in the service of many needs, accurate or distorted--and sexuality--something which embraces all the tender, sensitive,
caring, reflective, and responsible expressions of love. In this context, sexuality requires us to learn “that exquisitely sensitive give-and-take, much like the mutual imitation of birds in flight, where one shares a common world and destination with another, neither moving ahead and hence dominating and preempting, nor dropping behind, thereby abdicating responsibility and mutuality.”

5. And I would add, to these four principles, a fifth which possibly for Latter-day Saints should come first: the earnest cultivation of the companionship of the Spirit, deliberately including our positive and our negative feelings about sexuality in our prayers. This would include thanking for intimate experiences that would strengthen the marriage relationship with our spouse. It would include recognizing and bringing before the Lord feelings that we identify as sexual temptations. It would include our questions about areas in which we lack understanding. It would also include profound and trusting petitions for help in areas where we find ourselves lacking sensitivity, control, expressiveness.

As a therapist, I have learned to rely on experience and reason as well as on moral sensitivity to teach values. I feel that the heart, the spirit, and the mind combined can present the most persuasive arguments to resist temptation or to begin the process of therapeutic change known as repentance.

I feel that it behooves us as Latter-day Saints to reinforce our spiritual understanding of the power of chastity with the most persuasive constellation of social, personal and familial arguments we can, having faith that the Lord’s way will be demonstrably better viewed from any aspect. This has been little done in our community, but it is certainly not an impossible or improper goal. Let me offer just one example, again from Wulff’s thoughtful discussion, on how such an approach to sexual behavior might work, even though his discussion is limited because it excludes the spiritual dimension:

Wulff acknowledges that:

Certainly (masturbation) does not lead to insanity, pimples, reduced fertility, or any of the other disorders once attributed to it. Yet it is not harmless in the sense of having no effect. The practice of masturbation, and the fantasies usually accompanying it, will serve as preparation for other sexual expressions, and hence, in such activity one is laying down attitudes and habitual ways of responding which may aid, or disturb, one’s later adjustment. Autoerotic practices help one become familiar with his own sexual potentialities, especially because in such exploration he does not need to worry about a partner’s needs or uncertainties or perhaps even rejection; his fantasies will be exactly what he wants them to be, and he is precisely in control of the physical stimulation. Unfortunately, these circumstances may complicate considerable his adjustment later on. Sexual experience with another person is never as ideal as fantasy, though, of course, the mutuality of interpersonal expression promises fulfillment masturbation can never provide. Some masturbatory fantasies and techniques may condition an individual to feel or respond in a way that will make normal heterosexual relations difficult or fearful. If one becomes accustomed to a particular type of stimulation, to fantasies of one kind or another, or to specific circumstances for sexual arousal, he may not have the flexibility, responsibility, or even interest necessary to achieve the free and total intimacy and unity that characterizes sexually-expressed relationship at its best.13

There are correct principles in this area, as in every area of the gospel. The prohibitions, I think, tell us where it is not safe to go. They are the chain-link fence blocking off the cliff. Surely it is the act of children and teenagers to cling to the fence, to shake it, to try to find a way around or over or under it; it is the act of mature adults to note where the fence is, then turn and face the open meadow before them.

It seems so natural and important to me that we express in specific loving terms our gratitude to God who created us sexually and anointed us to communicate that sexuality in living, loving ways, and who will, if we are valiant, crown us with an eternity of sanctified and glorified creation that certainly, as one if its instrumentalities, includes our sexuality.

14 Ibid., p.11.

13 Ibid., p.12.