

BOOK REVIEW

WALKING A TIGHTROPE

BETWEEN HUSBAND AND WIFE

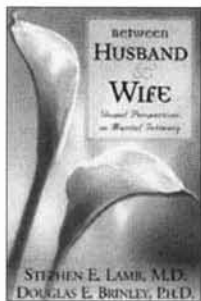
by Stephen E. Lamb and Douglas E. Brinley

Covenant Communications, 2000

202 pages, \$17.95



Reviewed by Romel W. Mackelprang



A new book on intimacy and sexuality tries to be open and frank enough to be helpful to LDS people with real questions and concerns while still being circumspect enough to be acceptable within sanctioned Church parameters.

THE NEW BOOK, *Between Husband and Wife*, by Stephen E. Lamb and Douglas E. Brinley reflects significant changes in LDS culture regarding sex and sexuality over the last generation. The authors acknowledge their desire is “to help married couples of all ages find greater satisfaction in their sexual union. Physical intimacy should enhance rather than detract from the partnership” (3). They maintain that people are sexual beings and that sexual intimacy is an important part of marriage relationships. This is a significant departure from the publication *Women and the Priesthood* (Bookcraft, 1976) in which the author, Rodney Turner, contended that for couples, “love is least present” when the desire for physical intimacy is strongest (233).

Lamb, an obstetrician and “speaker on sexual purity,” and Brinley, a BYU history professor and speaker on “strengthening marriages,” wrote this book as a “resource for married or engaged couples who are seeking

a simple and consistent gospel-based discussion of intimacy” (quoted from dust jacket, *italics added*). Together, the authors bring medical credentials and credibility within LDS circles. Their clinical expertise in dealing with sexual problems is less clear. However the authors acknowledge their book is meant to be “simple”; an emphasis that is, perhaps, the book’s greatest strength—and its most significant limitation.

Both this strength and weakness can be illustrated by referring to the PLISSIT model developed a quarter-century ago by a physician, Jack Annon, for helping people with sexual concerns. In Annon’s model, “P” stands for permission; “LI” for limited information; “SS” for specific suggestions; and “IT” for intensive therapy. This book does a good job of providing LDS readers with a sense of “permission.” Sex is OK. It is part of the Lord’s plan. It has strong spiritual components and can be physically gratifying and relationship enhancing. To a lesser degree, the

book provides “limited information” about a variety of topics such as sexual response and functioning, gender similarities and differences, and sexual dysfunction. Rather than the “specific suggestions” Annon calls for, the book provides general help for couples. As the authors suggest, readers will essentially receive “simple” affirming messages and positive suggestions. Readers expecting help for sexual problems or who would like information about “intensive therapy” will need to search elsewhere.

The book is well-organized and progresses logically. The first three chapters, 1) Better Marriage, Better Intimacy; 2) Sexual Intimacy in Marriage; and 3) Enjoyable Marital Intimacy, are designed primarily to help couples feel like they have permission to enjoy their sexual relationships. The authors use General Authority quotes to lend credibility to their message. This effort to convince readers that the General Authorities (and thus the Lord) approve of sexual intimacy indicates the authors’ awareness of the widely-felt ambivalence in Church culture about sexual expression and pleasure.

The remaining thirteen chapters provide the “limited [sexual] information” the authors deem most relevant to readers. For example, chapter 4 deals with human sexual response and chapter 8 with sexual dysfunctions. Chapters 6, 7, and 16 provide basic information about sexuality and about similarities and differences between men and women. Chapters 5 and 9–12 address sexual concerns common to people at different stages of their lives and marriages, from the honeymoon to the “later years.” Chapters 13 and 14 contain relationship advice for husbands and wives respectively.

Chapter 15, “Drawing the Line” is the chapter that is supposed to answer what is and isn’t OK in marriage. Depending on one’s point of view, the chapter could frustrate or relieve the minds of readers. Taking the lead from Church leaders over the last twenty years, this chapter states that not everything is acceptable in marriage but does not specifically outline behaviors deemed appropriate.

IN evaluating the text, readers might judge how well the authors walk the tightrope of being open and frank enough to be helpful to people with real questions and concerns while being circumspect enough to be acceptable within sanctioned Church circles. The book rates as a strong success in staying within sanctioned Church parameters. It rates only as a qualified success in openness and frankness and

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in providing accurate information.

The ongoing use of General Authority statements and gospel principles combined with the authors' hesitance to discuss sexually intimate details should make this tome acceptable to the most orthodox and conservative readers. The authors make a strong case for the interconnectedness between marital/sexual happiness and spiritual righteousness. However, whether it was their desire to steer clear of explicit discussion, their lack of clinical counseling experience, or their felt need to stay within Church-approved parameters, the authors overemphasize "gospel principles" to solve problems—to the book's detriment. There is little beyond granting people "permission" to enjoy sex and intimacy. For some readers, this assurance may be enough. For those seeking answers or resources to help with sexual problems or questions, this approach is insufficient.

A look at the book's references is perplexing. The authors have avoided using references to scholarly work done by LDS authors who have written articles on sexuality for publications not sanctioned by the Church. (Other than citations from the *Ensign*, the only other LDS source used is a twenty-year-old article from the *Journal of the Association of Mormon Counselors and Psychotherapists*.) The fact that the book largely ignores the work of LDS scholars makes me wonder if the authors ignored them for personal and/or professional reasons or if they feared alienating their audience or Church leaders were they to have used LDS scholarship work from non-sanctioned publications such as *SUNSTONE* or *Dialogue*. They cite controversial works by non-LDS authors such as Robert C. Kolodny, Virginia Masters, William Johnson, and Helen Kaplan (even though the authors condemn some of this work), so the absence of relevant LDS works is noteworthy.

The book displays the conservatism—some might say ambivalence—inherent in current Church culture relative to sexual openness. There are several examples. The book discusses problems that can arise when young people receive only negative messages about sex from parents and Church leaders. And while it encourages parents of engaged couples to talk with their children about sex, it cautions that discussions "need not address techniques or details" (59). They caution against too much openness stating that as "Latter-day Saints, we are hesitant to provide too much information to young couples for fear that they might experiment before marriage" (62). They acknowledge a "fine line"

exists, however. With the all-pervasive messages of constraint that LDS youth receive, I believe more openness could help a lot of couples. One could argue that greater knowledge leads to more (rather than less) responsible decision-making.

Another sign of the authors' ambivalence is found in the chapter about "drawing the line" between appropriate and inappropriate sexual behavior in marriage. The authors discuss the need for restraint and the importance of avoiding coercion of one's spouse. They also address "unnatural behavior" and quote General Authorities who state that an "anything goes" approach is not acceptable, yet they never answer the question, "What is unworthy sexual behavior?" Clinicians whose LDS clients ask them "What is OK?" note that they are frequently asked if oral sex is acceptable. Surely the authors are aware of this question, yet they never mention oral sex in the chapter, although the book's index lists pages 163–171 (this chapter's page numbers) as reference to the topic "oral sex." Are the authors implying that oral sex is "beyond the line?" If not, why reference the topic in the index without mentioning it in the chapter itself?

Another place the authors' ambivalence is evident is in their equation of sex and sexual intimacy with penis-vagina intercourse. Non-coital intimacy is discussed primarily as "foreplay" or as activity preparatory to lovemaking. This is unfortunate, for it may create the impression that sexual intimacy, at least to orgasm, must include coitus. In my clinical practice (and the practices of colleagues), non-coital lovemaking, especially for women, may be the primary means by which they can achieve orgasm. For many people, LDS or not, coitus is not always a necessary element to lovemaking.

This emphasis is also unfortunate, for it may cause some readers to feel left out. The authors repeatedly discuss the negative impact that disability and health problems can have upon sexual intimacy. (For example, the text repeatedly refers to erectile dysfunction as "impotence." Because of its negative connotations, this term is seldom used anymore.) In several places, the authors also imply that medical treatment is the way to solve problems. Unfortunately, this foreboding emphasis on illness and disability, along with the implication that *intercourse* and *intimacy* are synonymous, ignores the needs of a significant number of readers. For example, I have counseled scores of faithful LDS people with spinal cord injuries with anesthetic genitals and/or erectile dysfunction who are able to have satisfying sexual in-

timacy, often without coitus. In addition, satisfying lovemaking can occur for both men and women in the absence of orgasm.

The book may also leave some readers with misunderstandings about the nature of sexual dysfunction. In several places, the authors provide the percentages of psychological versus biological dysfunction. While physiologic changes can impair sexual function, the book presents an oversimplified dichotomy between the two. For example, the book correctly states that, on the whole, women achieve orgasm more slowly than do men. However, orgasm in both men and women

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occurs through an interplay of physical and emotional factors. Treatment, whether self-directed or with a therapist, involves a combination of biological and psychological modalities. Similarly, as we age, physiological changes in erectile ability occur in men. However, psychological reactions may exacerbate the problems associated with such physical changes. In addition, these dysfunctions range greatly in severity. While physical complications increase as people age, it is more the exception than the rule that sexual problems are exclusively psychological or physiological.

THE book does contain discussions of contraceptives, including "hormonal" contraceptives. It also discusses hormonal replacement therapies, especially for women undergoing meno-

REVIEW ESSAY

ASKING THE WRONG QUESTION

BRIDGING CULTURES: ASIAN AMERICAN MORMONS

by Jessie Embry

Charles Redd Center for Western Studies, 1999

147 Pages, \$14.95



By Carolyn Jew



Are we in the Church willing to develop the skills and programs necessary to successfully integrate members from ethnic groups into geographic-based wards?

pause. Many readers will find these passages helpful. The book would have been better if it had also had some discussion about the possible side effects associated with these kinds of treatments.

The book discusses sensate focus, an important tool for helping couples explore their sexual relationships. Unfortunately, the book fails to discuss the equally important companion to sensate focus: self-exploration. Sometimes referred to as masturbation, self-exploration is a technique whereby people who are self-conscious or lack knowledge can explore their own bodies and the types of touch that are pleasurable to them. They then can share this information with their spouse for use in sensate focus. Self-exploration has been an important part of the therapeutic process for many of the couples with whom I have worked. In every case in which LDS couples have expressed reticence, I have suggested they talk to their bishop and have their bishop talk to me if this were a problem. Not once in twenty years has this proven to be a problem. In another part of the book, the authors assure readers that mutual manual stimulation by partners is not the same as masturbation. While the Church has taken a stance on masturbation for the purposes of self-gratification, the authors would have done well to discuss this companion technique in the discussion of sensate focus.

Overall, I commend the authors for writing a book for LDS readers that covers such important and sensitive material. The majority of readers should find it enjoyable and informative. It should offend very few while providing "permission" and "limited information" to many. As a clinician, I am hesitant to endorse some elements of the book. And as a Latter-day Saint, I wish the authors had included elements that are absent. Yet, on the whole, the authors have done a good job.

As the parent of four children, some of them adults, I would recommend the book to them—albeit probably my copy replete with my notes, comments, and disagreements. I would then most likely follow their reading with in-depth discussions of the book and its message. However, even as I write this review, I also realize that discussions with my children are my responsibility, even if my suggestions and conclusions differ from those in the book. If this book can help more parents discuss sexual intimacy with their children, and more couples to talk openly about sex, then whether we agree or disagree with specific messages or themes in the book, maybe the authors have achieved their most important objective. ☐

WHAT IS BETTER for Asian American Church members—ethnic wards or geographic wards? This is one of the questions Jessie Embry asks in her book *Bridging Cultures: Asian American Mormons*—yet this book isn't really about Asians at all. Nearly all of us have opinions about the ideal ward. While these ideals may vary slightly, they essentially have the same theme: we like wards in which we feel most at home, most appreciated, most welcomed, most needed. This desire for our wards to be a "home away from home" goes far beyond simple fellowshiping notions of having people say "hi" to you at meetings and activities. As Kafka writes in *The Metamorphosis*, "All the casual acquaintances never become intimate friends." Minor efforts do little to close the emotional distance that too easily keeps us apart. Anyone may attend a ward but not have the sense that they belong. Thus the question of

where we are happiest often rests not singly on ourselves but also on who else happens to be there and how they feel about us in turn. Community is a dynamic negotiation process among its members.

This "we prefer being where we feel most loved" explanation should not be revelatory, but the book makes believe it is. To her credit, Embry does acknowledge the limitations of her study. It was not well-financed, and she indicates how difficult it was to locate and interview people who are no longer active. Hence the study's findings rest upon the results of 138 interviews of active Asian American members attending an ethnic (Asian) ward in Provo, Utah. Not surprisingly, the study finds the vast majority of these members prefer ethnic wards over geographic ones. That's like asking people at the Super Bowl whether they like football or not! If a person hates football, she or he is not likely to show up, even at that game. If active

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