

Tracing the roots of sexual morality . . .

SEX ED.

A CURRICULUM FOR TODAY

By H. Wayne Schow



sexual education of LDS youth but also as it affects the sexual lives of LDS adults. Regardless of how we develop into adulthood, those conceptions and attitudes toward sex that we are indoctrinated with as youth tend to influence us still.

I like Stephen's illustration—through his experiences with R-rated movies—of how sin and fear were the principal lenses through which he viewed and evaluated sexuality while growing up (which is probably typical of most young Latter-day Saints). I agree with his implication that, if eventually he came to a more judicious, life-affirming view of this challenging, appealing, and rich element of our humanity, he did so not so much because of but in spite of Church influence. I admit, as a considerably older fellow, that my own progress through this territory was very similar.

"Not so much because of, but in spite of, Church influence." That is a sad assessment to make. It shouldn't be that way. On the contrary, Church teaching ought to be preeminently helpful in the development of healthy sexual attitudes.

In this reflection on the sexual preparation of our youth, I've chosen to focus not only on what individual parents and teachers might consider doing to create a healthier, well-rounded understanding of sexuality, but also on what the Church itself promotes—its dogmas and teaching practices—for that's where much of the problem lies—the origins of the

I appreciate Stephen Carter's personal description of confronting as a youth and young adult the enticing, dangerous, dark realm of sexuality. And I think he has framed very nicely the problematic nature of this matter, not only as it concerns the

guilt, the fear, the shame, the embarrassment, and the dammed up, repressed sexual lives of many adult Latter-day Saints.

I believe we need to rid sexuality of its trappings of disrespectability, sinfulness, and irrational fear. For that to happen, I suggest the following:

- **FIRST**, we should frankly acknowledge that we are sexual beings, the inheritors of God's gift of sexuality, and we should be proud of that and grateful. The fact is, for most of us, sex is one of the most mysterious and intriguing aspects of life. Like the Grand Canyon, it is awesome, dazzlingly beautiful, and very challenging to negotiate. On some primordial level, we know that sexuality is a divine energy that underlies and drives creation. We should stop trying to pretend it isn't so.

But our sexuality is more than this. In the fully realized personality, it is complexly present. It is central to the Dionysian life force in us, a means of surrendering ourselves to a power larger than ourselves, of being swept up in an all-encompassing union that temporarily obliterates our individuality. At the same time, paradoxically, our sexuality is self-expressive, a dynamic assertion of personal identity; it is a "fingerprint" of personal force. Further yet, it is a means by which we can overcome our isolation, a means by which we can focus our desire to be fully present to and with another person. As the primary ritual of interpersonal intimacy, sexual connection has the potential to integrate the mysterious, soulful facets of human life. More than simply gratifying our physical senses, sexual union can unify body, mind, and spirit. To ignore this is to give up a rich and integrative dimension of personal wholeness. A life without sexual realization is not a complete life, however good it otherwise may be. Our youth should hear us say these things.

- **SECOND**, we should abandon the old Pauline/Augustinian/Book of Mormon dualism that sees the body as the enemy of spirit and the avenue through which Satan has access to our immortal souls. The body is not merely a poor, disreputable servant of the spiritual self; King Benjamin's warning about the natural man is not about sexuality; sexuality itself does not de-



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file our bodies, God's temples. Teaching otherwise, explicitly and implicitly, is at the root of much misunderstanding, inner conflict, and repression. It stands in the way of psychic wholeness, of full self-realization, and it undermines healthy sexual fulfillment.

• **THIRD**, we need to understand more rationally the real basis for sexual morality. Many Christians—and many Latter-day Saints—assume that sexual prohibitions (and moral tenets in general) originate at some universal level of abstraction. In other words, that they were decreed in the beginning by God, more or less arbitrarily, as a test of obedience—"thou shalt not." Or they believe that sex is somehow inherently evil or that God thinks asceticism is good for us and doesn't want us to have too much pleasure. Granting that God does care how his children mature sexually and can communicate his wisdom to us, we must also remember that history teaches that moral codes have evolved as a response to cultural conditions and collective social experience.

Social groups have long understood that in order to promote stability, peace, safety, and justice, certain natural impulses need to be restrained. These include the inherently disruptive potential of sex. Absent the responsibility that needs to accompany sexual behavior, society is left to deal with the fallout. Therefore, sexual prohibitions arise out of practical social concerns. For example, adultery is forbidden in or-

der to secure fidelity and stability in marriages, reducing the disruptive effects of sexual competition, sexual promiscuity, and sexually transmitted disease, thereby creating conditions conducive to rearing children. Fornication is forbidden to discourage relationships wherein the participants are not prepared to assume responsibility for the complex outcomes of sexual intimacy.

In short, sexual moral codes arise from the practical relationship between acts and outcomes. That is what justifies them. This is precisely what we need to emphasize in our sexual/moral education of youth and adults, not some vague,

guilt-engendering notion of sexuality as inherently sinful.

WHILE I CONSIDER sexual self-realization to be highly desirable, by no means do I advocate sexual license. A great force uncontrolled has as much potential for damage as for benefit. As the gospel teaches, appropriate boundaries should be laid down, and this is indeed challenging. But in our zeal to control, we ought not draw the rules so rigidly as to stifle the very benefits we would protect. We don't need to say "no" just for the sake of saying "no." The trick is to grant as much leeway for sexual realization, with as

much acceptance of individual human differences, as is consistent with positive outcomes.

If two people join to give each other sexual pleasure, is there anything inherently wrong with that? On the physical side alone, probably not, no more than there is wrong in dancing with someone or in enjoying a fine dinner with a companion. No, the problem is not necessarily the legitimacy of sharing pleasurable bodily sensations per se (which can be seen as generous), it lies rather in the com-

lications of the larger contexts—psychological and social—that surround sex. And that is where morality must focus. If two people engage in a sexual act with a damaging psychological cost to one or both, or to others to whom they are committed, or with a social cost which they

may not justifiably ask society to pay, then there is a moral complication that cannot responsibly be ignored. So, in educating our youth about sex, we should stress its power, its beauty, its rewards, but at the same time its inherent complications and responsibilities.

But that is a challenge, for potential complications exist most of the time, and they can be very subtle and hard to evaluate responsibly, particularly in the heat of passion. If there really were a strict duality of body and spirit/mind, casual or unfaithful physical sex could occur with fewer negative consequences—as with brute animals. But we humans are



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more complexly constituted: our bodies, with their acts and sensations, are inseparable from our psyches. Our sense of self derives from all we are and do and from how we are situated in the world; our sexual feelings and interactions—powerful as they are—ultimately influence and are influenced by that larger, holistic context. Accordingly, sexual intimacy with another is inevitably more than simple physical gratification: it makes the participants vulnerable in a potentially very far-reaching way. That is at once its beauty, its wonder—and its danger.

RELIGIONS have long been the principal policers of sexual morality, in part because from early times they have been the conservative guardians of social stability. In addition to whatever spiritual wisdom they have access to, some influential leaders and theologians emphasize firm restrictions and even ascetic renunciation, using the formidable resources of theological authority and language in an effort to control the effects of sexual behaviors.

As I was growing up, my Church leaders apparently believed that the “sin next to murder” (Alma 39:5) meant fornication because they used it again and again to put the fear of damnation into us horny teenagers. I’ll forego a detailed analysis of how this scripture is taken out of context,¹ or, even if Alma were referring specifically to sexual sin, how such a label begs for qualification: Are not some crimes of deception, violence, betrayal, or desertion much more hurtful overall than simple fornication?

I appreciate the restraining role that religions assume for governing sexuality. We certainly see in society today some of the considerable problems that come from irresponsibly permissive attitudes toward sexual indulgence. But I regret religious indoctrination that, whatever its good intentions, oversimplifies or ignores individual contexts. And I regret religious indoctrination that, whatever its good intentions, paints sexu-

ality heavy-handedly in ugly, disgusting colors, making individuals ashamed of their sexual feelings, inhibited, and shut down.



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AS a grandfather, I have thought about what kind of sexual/moral training I want my grandchildren to have. Based on prudence and long conditioning, I favor strategies that promise safety in the present permissive cultural climate. But at the same time, I want my grandchildren to acquire the qualities of mind and character that will enable them to look over the edge of the Grand Canyon of sexuality and, when they can do so responsibly, go into that thrilling place with zest and confidence to discover its inner grandeur. I hope their religious upbringing, with its potential for guilt and fear, will not have compromised their ability to do that.

I believe it possible to teach sexual discipline and responsibility without some of the adverse outcomes of negative suppression. What should we as Latter-day Saints do differently?

- Avoid educational strategies that awaken shame about the body and its natural responses.

- Abandon the teaching of a body/spirit dualism that implies the body is suspect, the avenue of temptation, the enemy of spirit.

- Take a modified approach to Standards Night programs: jettison metaphors of shared chewing gum,

nails pulled from boards that leave holes behind, and roses blighted by handling—all of which encourage shame, guilt, and a negative view of sexuality.

- Throttle way back on the futile crusade by overzealous bishops and stake presidents to stamp out masturbation by young people. In moderation, masturbation is a mostly harmless and natural means of self-discovery, as well as a safety valve. I am persuaded that the psychic damage caused by guilt and self-

loathing (which are often the results of worthiness interviews on this subject) far outweighs any negative effects of the act itself.

- Encourage young people to be completely honest in acknowledging the orientation of their sexual desire. Allow those who are attracted to their own gender to acknowledge that desire without shame or guilt, without its being regarded as a moral failure or character flaw. But expect them to meet the same moral tests required of all of us: that their acts and feelings produce good fruit.

- Discourage the kind of distortion that results in seeing sexual virtue in oversimplified terms of black/white, either/or—the kind of distortion evident in an oft-cited quotation from a Church leader some years ago who said he would rather see one of his children in the grave and “virtuous” than alive and stained with the sin of fornication.

Instead, I would emphasize the positive aspects of our sexuality. I would encourage the young to see themselves holistically, and not least to feel pride in the body, its beauty and its power. I would discuss sexual morality not in terms of sin, guilt, shame, and repression but as a challenging stewardship over a pearl of great price. I would attempt to prepare them not through fear, not by diminishing sex, but by helping them understand the opportunity, the complexity, and the accompanying responsibility of this divine gift. The stress would be laid on self-mastery and on the wisdom of patient deferral of gratification. As Hamlet said to Horatio in another context, “The readiness is all.”

I would help them understand the practical and emotional costs of carelessness and impulsiveness. Such a positive emphasis seems greatly preferable to sully their perception of the impressive sexual power that is theirs. And if a youth acts unwisely and goes into the canyon prematurely, I would try very hard not to compound the practical price by heaping on him or her a lifetime of guilt.

PERHAPS I AM unrealistic in thinking that we could, in these respects, have it both ways. Such an approach would unquestionably set the bar higher—not only for the youth but for their teachers as well. To present sex as potentially positive, desirable, beautiful, as an aspect of our fully realized humanity, and yet to bring its expression under reasonable control would require greater openness and a willingness to consider moral issues painstakingly in holistic contexts. A great many adults among us, raised with negativity and repression, conditioned to feel that in a religious context they cannot openly acknowledge their own sexuality, may find this very hard to do.

But after all, isn't such an approach more in keeping with principles that lie at the heart of LDS theology: a bedrock belief in the importance of experience, belief in the necessity of freedom to choose, but with acceptance of the risk and responsibility that these entail? ☺

NOTE

1. A good discussion of this scriptural passage that takes it out of the sexual arena is Michael R. Ash, “The Sin ‘Next to Murder’: An Alternative Interpretation.” *SUNSTONE*, November 2006, 34–43.



OBSCURE OBJECTS OF DESIRE

By Paul Swenson

Our bodies are our own
misshapen artifacts of lust.
In otherworldly orbits,
they wobble on a tether
we cannot control. The weather
of our brains' electric selectivity
interprets what we think
we see and feel out there,
in alternating flashes
of delight/despair.

While they are remote
from us, partially concealed
from view, we own our bodies.
They are our own,
yet are not subject to us.
Obscure objects of desire,
they pull us
through the void
to other bodies
and someone else's storm.