

## SEXUALITY

I am surprised to remember a certain degree of openness in my family when it came to the body. Perhaps it was Mother's background on the farm, where matters of procreation among animals are everyday occurrences, and our father being blind meant that he was sometimes oblivious to what was seen and what was kept covered. At any rate, I was never ignorant of the naked body—male or female—right down to the circumcised penis. At the age of sixteen, walking with campers along a highway coming back from an overnight hike, a car rolled up beside us, and the pervert driving it ogled this assemblage of naïf teenage girls and exposed an erect uncircumcised penis, which did shock me. But at home, our family took Saturday night baths, sometimes together, or at least in rapid tandem.

I do remember growing curious, but not markedly so. It was Mother who purchased the set of three books for the family in 1938—What Every Boy Ought to Know, What Every Girl Ought to Know, and What Every Woman of Forty-Five Ought to Know. Since my brother Phil was turning 13, I surmise that she felt he deserved some instruction in sexual matters and that reading a book would be the easiest way to transmit the necessary information. I read the book I was given, but it told me nothing of interest, so of course I sneaked a look at his. That was not very enlightening either, so in desperation I read Mother's. The whole matter appeared to be hopelessly oblique in the stilted language of these books, or frightfully dull, I do not remember which.

When two of my peers at school attained puberty one fateful weekend, they were full of mysterious whispered remarks. When I asked them what the ruckus was all about, one of them looked at me with superior disdain, "Our mother said that if your mother wants you to know, she will tell you." I ran home and asked my mother—not sure what I was asking. She and Dad went into consultation and several hours later Dad sat me down, Mother beside him, and talked to me about white slavery in Chicago. About how men sometimes seduce young girls, perhaps injecting them with a drug, and then carrying them away. I should remember this as horrifying, but I do not—such rumors were already spilling around the corners at school. The favorite one was that you might go into a drug store and sit at the counter to have a coke, and suddenly your stool would be lowered into the basement and you would be dragged away into slavery.

What were my parents thinking with this story? Somehow I did learn about menstruation, and when it finally arrived the end of my junior year in high school, far after all my classmates had been "getting the curse" for years, I was

elated and relieved. It meant womanhood.

As for the relationship of this event to having babies, eventually I tried to puzzle it all out on my own, after discussing it with a friend. We knew there were a limited number of options possible. In the end, I figured it out on the basis of logic and ruling out the more preposterous explanations. I was gratified to find in my freshman Health Ed. class in college that I had been accurate. A small triumph. At last I "knew."

I was still not connecting this physical information with romantic desire, at least on the intellectual level. But my body was making the connection for me. I was attracted by ads for Lux soap featuring glamorous movie stars provocatively attired and posed. I watched the college students in love on campus, and sensed the connection between their behaviors and the expected result: a walk down the aisle as a bride, and the eventual production of babies. For myself, I was content to pleasure myself, as I had learned accidentally when very young. It was something to enjoy, but also to hide since it had earned Mother's especially severe and pointed condemnation.

One evening, passing by our parents' bedroom door that was half ajar, I glimpsed my mother inside, undressing. Dad had come over to her, and lifted one breast to his lips and kissed it. This was as close to "the primal scene" as I had ever seen, but I registered it with appreciation, locking it away in my memory as confirmation of the aspect of their love not spoken of, but nonetheless present.

In the midst of a lot of prudery in the Wheaton community, and in our household, I wonder if this did not leave both you and me highly charged sexually. Since I lacked an outlet in either casual friendships with boys or dating experience, I developed a series of crushes on women—a normal stage for young girls, but abnormally protracted in me. I have observed over the years that Phil had also been attracted to women—something considered utterly natural, but the dominance of that element in both of us interests me. Both of us found in our subsequent marriages a fairly virile element in our spouses.

In college, I finally came to a degree of maturation through my first romantic relationship with a guy named Archibald my senior year. We were an item for six months and then we crashed with a thud. After graduation I left the college environment with its convenient supply of eligible men, and was abruptly cast upon the barren landscape of a world where I have to fend for myself in finding a mate. Unfortunately, I found no way to grow from that meager college dating experience, and instead regressed into a safe world of single women. Since I traveled a lot in my work, I could find a woman who would respond to my attentions and with whom I could engage in soulful attachment.

These relationships nourished me, and also left a hungry void. I was incontrovertibly heterosexual, but these intense relationships made me question. At the age of twenty-eight, I asked a friend of mine what a homosexual was, because I truly did not know. The sexual possibilities of two persons of the same sex were a mystery to me. Since I had figured out sex on my own as a teenager, I was impressed with the ideal complementary of male and female sexual equipment, and would not have considered it even possible to mate with another person of one's own sex.

When I came to therapy, I felt guilty about continually "falling in love" with women. I could not explain why I could walk into a room of people and become aroused by a woman there, why the urge for intimacy and soul-sharing came so spontaneously, when at the same time I longed to marry. Was there something wrong with my sexual nature? What an explosion of joy came when therapy freed me to totally accept my body—that of a woman, and then very soon thereafter, to awaken in me the realization that I wanted to marry, that indeed my inclinations were now aligned between body and mind. I wanted to marry a man. I had always wanted it abstractly; now I let my body awaken to its desire.

Dating developed far more easily than I had imagined—given my pathetic history in that arena. I was thirty-seven, and at the University of Chicago, and "in heat." University men were more open than men I had known in my sheltered past. And it was the end of the 60s and the beginning of "free love." This raised the more adult issue of intercourse, rather than dating etiquette, which had been my concern in high school. My readiness to respond to men's advances made it imperative that I think clearly, not just with my sexual nature.

It was a wild time, and I learned quickly how I wanted to behave, and what behavior I wanted to elicit from men. I was fortunate in being able to retain the control I needed, and to feel liberated to experience what was good for me—good in a deep bodily sense. Therapy had taught me to be in tune with heart and mind and soul and body simultaneously. I found one man, in particular, who was especially gifted and tender with me as he gently introduced me to the pleasure of my body. The next morning, walking into the cafeteria at International House, several men crowded over to my table to be with me, sensing a blossoming, a radiance, of which I was blissfully unaware. One of them later asked me out. I was quietly nonplussed. I was carelessly dressed in sweatshirt and cut off jeans, but my body was relaxed and open, and my face showed contentment and peace. I was surprised to learn that "men know" when a woman has been awakened.

I once asked Don what it was that first attracted him to me (that famous line when we bumped into each other, when I was coming off the elevator,

"There's something special about you; I would like to know what it is."). He admitted it was my physical appearance. Not my character, not my soul, as I might have supposed and been taught. And after we did make a connection, it was touch that prompted him to move toward me more definitively. That kiss, as we stood together reading his poetry. (The more complete story is in *Still Woman Moving*.)

So Don taught me sex in all its deepest and varied forms, and I am not sorry. The night before our wedding, Mother and Dad were staying at our apartment. Mother came to me privately and asked "Would you like to talk with me?" *She meant about sex*. I was too startled to be annoyed. *Where were you all those years?* I felt a sudden sympathy for her awkwardness. I looked at her, and said simply, "No, there is no need." But something inside me churned. *One's mother is supposed to teach one about these intimate matters*. And she could not.

Perhaps for her in her times and with her simple country upbringing, sex was primarily about procreation—something I did not experience. As a result, I have not had the awesome experience of giving birth, but I honor that these are uniquely female capacities, and abstractly, I miss having had them. But since I did not want to raise children, it was not difficult for me to forego that aspect of womanhood. I have been content to develop motherly tenderness in other ways.

Sex changes with the passing of the years. For one thing, it becomes knit with deeper and deeper love. It becomes more diffuse, throughout the entire body, not as focused on the parts which are supposed to "perform" and which cannot always respond as readily. Sex has changed in society, as well. Some of the change has been salutary, some destructive. When sex unites with soul bonding, it strengthens. When separated as a thing-in-itself, it loses potency as a bonding factor.

But sex mingled with love—deep bonding of heart and soul—becomes for me a foretaste of a mystical unity which I believe is the essence of spiritual life, and is an emblem of that rarely experienced feeling of *Oneness With All That Is*, of which the mystics speak. I do not pretend that such experience occurs often, but there are glimpses, in a good marriage. And such moments also come through an aching beautiful musical refrain, through the grandeur of nature, through a simple line of poetry.