

SEX AND THE SPIRIT

THE ROMANCE OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

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Introduction

We invite you to join us for a frank and refreshing conversation about the relationship between faith and sexuality. People of faith seem to have a great deal of difficulty talking about sex. Perhaps our reluctance stems from the storm of criticism we face from all sides as soon as we hazard a conversation of any honesty or significance. Maybe we feel ill-equipped to speak at once from places transcendent and earthy, thinking they inherently clash, even though our holy scriptures do not. Perhaps we're reluctant to discuss our sexuality because over the centuries we have imposed upon ourselves a painful chasm between our spiritual and physical natures. We consequently segregate them, enforcing false boundaries that we don't really understand. Or could it be that we are simply poorly prepared and unrehearsed for an exchange about such intimate and personal matters? Most of us don't really know where to begin.

Whatever the reason, Christians can no longer afford to remain silent about sex. For today expanding technologies put sex "out there" in ways that alter our understanding of what we once called romance and courtship. The world reduces sex to a video game with special effects to be played with manic intensity. Devoid of

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soul, such thin and flat renderings of human sexuality reduce us from creatures fearfully, wonderfully, and mysteriously made to mechanical cogs in the transmission of pleasure. Treating the orgasm as our one shot at self-transcendence, sex gets transacted in ways as rote as they are shallow. Despair is the upshot. People become deadened to sex, to self, and to God. As long as Christians remain silent about God's alternatives, rooted in our divine origins and destiny, how can we find our way to passionate and faithful sexuality?

In *Sex and the Spirit* we intend to explore how to claim and affirm sexual intimacy in our increasingly isolated and alienated culture, addled by technology and unwilling to look each other in the eye. We aim to lift up passion—human and divine—to bridge this painful chasm persisting between our spiritual and sensual selves. Among others, theologian Soren Kierkegaard described faith as life's highest passion—our passion for God—placing our desire for a relationship with God above all other passions. We try to contain our passion for God, reducing faith to a set of rules, facts, doctrine or activism. We similarly reduce our momentous and transforming passion whenever we settle for sex merely as release, amusement, marketing or entertainment. God promises us so much more.

Sex and the Spirit is written for those who seek a sense of deeper sexuality than society's prevailing affirmation of sex as entertainment. This work is also written for those who glimpse the potential of sexuality to express life's mystery and complexity, and for those who feel there must be a better way than our current course even if no one is talking about it. We believe their number is legion, maybe even a silent majority, rooting for conversations like this one from the anonymity of the sidelines.

We approach faith and sexuality from the perspective of unifying God's passion for us with our passion for each other as women and men. We hope you will find this work an effective bridge to advance this conversation and to alleviate the sexual estrangement we so often experience with one another. We also be-

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lieve the sexual union of hearts and minds, souls and spirits has been sadly underrepresented over against the physical merging of bodies in telling the story of our sexuality. So this discussion hopes to help reconcile our spiritual and physical nature from a distinctively Christian perspective.

Currently, as sex talk blares from radios and blazes across the Internet, the conversation is remarkably shallow, driven by technical advice on how to have sex. In this spiritually barren landscape, people jump from casual hellos over cappuccino right into bed. Instant gratification displaces the slow ritual of dating practiced by previous generations. Hooking up, “friends with benefits,” and online encounters replace authentic spiritual friendship, the context for healthy sexual intimacy.

The world prattles endlessly about sex, but contributes little to authentic intimacy. At the same time, the church talks little about sex, apart from our continuous elusive quests after ethical consensus and our politically charged exchanges around same-sex relations. Clearly the church has made significant strides with these important sexual issues. Yet vital support for the sexuality of heterosexual men and women remains elusive. We neglect one of the most essential of human experiences and one of the sweetest of God’s good gifts. As things stand, many couples feel invisible and need help with issues of personal and shared intimacy, but feel too awkward to ask directly for it.

What if we were to affirm our sexuality as spiritual beings without ponderous ethics and divisive politics always having the first and last word? Having said that, we do affirm an implicit commitment to Christian ethics throughout our work. We assume certain underlying ethical commitments such as just relationships between persons as equal participants in God’s gifts that uphold mutuality, love and justice as witness to God’s intention for human life on earth as in heaven. We refer the reader to other fine works for a more fulsome discussion on Christian sexual ethics, which is beyond the scope of this conversation.

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Here we invite the reader to suspend judgment or preconceived opinions about what the church teaches and what we may think the Bible has to say about sex. What if we were to linger over the mystery of our femaleness and maleness to appreciate its tender power in its own right rather than driven by outside agendas? What if Christians had the nerve to freely explore sexuality within the church on the church's own God-given terms just as Song of Solomon unabashedly describes and celebrates it within the canon of Scripture?

We lift up the Song of Solomon from the Old Testament as the touchstone for this essential conversation on sex and the spirit. Many Christians will discover Song of Solomon, also called Song of Songs, through this work for the first time. You're not alone if you are unfamiliar with it, nestled as it is near the center of our Bible.

You may wonder what to expect from these reflections that celebrate Song of Solomon sexuality. You can count on having a conversation cast more in the indicative than the imperative mood. That means our reflections will be more expressive and imaginative than commanding of how you should think and behave. We encourage you to engage this surprising conversation that begins with affirming sex as God's gift but not unaware of its power, both creative and destructive; a conversation unafraid of the connecting of bodies but unwilling to forget the union of souls; and a conversation marked by the pulls and tugs of real everyday attraction. This will be a conversation where the erotic is treasured rather than hidden and obscured; where we candidly enjoy how God has made and declared our sexuality good; where our desire leads us to discover our most intimate selves and points us beyond ourselves to our yearning for God. This alternative, countercultural approach to sex recalls a hymn written by Thomas Troeger:

Holy and good is the gift of desire.
God made our bodies for passion and fire.

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Intending that love would draw from the flame.
Lives that would shine with God's image and name.¹

In *Sex and the Spirit*, we initiate the conversation of what it looks like to live fully sexual and authentically Christian lives. We affirm that wholesome and passionate sexuality is God's gift to us. God created us such that our spirituality and sensuality naturally connect. What God has joined together, we have sadly torn asunder, and this brokenness is writ large against the backdrop of our living.

While having sex is easy, sustaining sexual intimacy in the context of a faithful relationship is difficult. The mystical union of body and soul requires a courageous and vulnerable conversation. We think the Church can do more to support and sustain intimate and fully sexual relationships that are faithful to God.

Our faith teaches us that we humans are created for deep and abiding relationships with one another and with God. Some geneticists claim we are hardwired for God. We yearn for meaningful relationships, for enduring connections. In like manner, we long for intimacy with God, to know more fully who we are and to whom we belong. We long for full expression of healthy sexuality at the core of our being, yet this hope is too often ignored in our Christian formation.

As pastors dedicated to parish ministry, living and serving in the trenches with our people's struggles and joys, we know the grass roots where they live. And yet as female and male, our perspectives also differ. With fifty years of experience between us as pastors, we have heard the cry from the heart of our people around issues of intimacy in private counseling settings. Yet we observe the reluctance to discuss such matters when we widen the

1. Thomas Troeger, "Holy and Good Is the Gift of Desire," 1988, 1991 © Oxford University Press, found in *Chalice Hymnal*, ed. Daniel B. Merrick and David P. Polk (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1995), # 509.

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conversation. For example, one of us offered a class on sexuality on a Sunday morning and only one person attended, a woman in her late seventies. When the usual crowd of adult Sunday School participants were asked why they didn't attend, one woman bravely admitted, "We wanted to come but we were afraid you would ask us to share what we think and we wouldn't know what to say!" Clearly we care about sexual intimacy and its connection to faith and we long to engage a wider audience in this urgent discussion. Where do we begin?

An excellent way for parents to engage delicate issues of sexuality within families is to leave out well-written books for the next generation to find, and then see what happens by way of question and answer. This simply works. Without wanting to patronize or matronize, we believe *Sex and the Spirit* could be such a book strategically "left out there" for adults to discover and subsequently discuss.

Our format for writing is simple. We take turns responding to real-life, candid questions from the heart in a simple, direct, heartfelt, and accessible question-and-answer format. At the conclusion of each chapter, the other of us writes a brief response to the work, much as you would.

According to these designs, we hope the book is at once impassioned and insightful, erotic and funny, faithful and personal, provoking ourselves and the reader to consider ourselves as sexual beings within what our Christian faith and theology teach about what it means to be human. We believe that an open, frank, and forthright conversation along these lines might even persuade some to consider returning to the Church, having dismissed it as out of touch with real life.

Of course, we two authors can only write from what we know. In this work, there are issues we simply do not address. For example, we don't write about same-sex or transgendered relations, though such explorations and conversations need to take place within the church. Much pain and misunderstanding con-

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tinues in the church and we welcome this continuing discussion in other works. However, we choose not to address these issues because as heterosexual pastors, we do not want to speak for an experience that is not our own. We feel others are better equipped to support the questions and concerns of our same-sex brothers and sisters in Christ. We therefore look forward to an equivalent book written from other perspectives, but believe that we are not the best ones to write it.

Finally, we invite the reader to continue these conversations beyond this book on the *Sex and the Spirit* web site, blog, and at upcoming retreats. Warm up the teapot or pour yourself a cup of coffee. Find a quiet corner of your harried life to read. If one question doesn't quite fit your interest, keep reading. We hope you will then find the courage to discuss these questions in book groups or at the gym. And so it begins!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

While we have pondered writing this book in the abstract since the mid-90s, the firm plans for it set up during a Lilly Endowment-supported pastoral sabbatical to Isla de Margarita, thirty miles off the Venezuela coast, in 2009. As we gathered and met with other pastor-authors—all of whom were flown to this island courtesy of the Lilly Endowment—they charged us to fill this yawning void in the literature and consciousness of the mainline church. A seed was sown that now comes to fruition.

Full credit and thanks are due to the Lilly Endowment for creating room within the harried lives of local church pastors for projects such as this one. We are deeply indebted and this book would never have gotten past the dream stage and been completed without the generous support of the Lilly Endowment.

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LOVE, SEX, AGING, AND THE STIRRING OF PASSION'S FIRE

Dale Rosenberger

Some claim that across the decades, the embers of love, sex and romance must inevitably cool. Some couples give up completely on making love—both literally and metaphorically. I simply don't want to feel that way. Is it realistic to hope to remain sexually alive in all seasons of life?

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In his book *As for Me and My House*, Walter Wangerin narrates one couple's purgatory of lost passion amid advancing years. We have all seen this scenario before.

Glance around the restaurant. It's Denny's on a Saturday night, but it could be any place where a couple can sit to eat. There's a low hum of voices. People are talking; waitresses slide by on soft shoes; laughter bubbles up now and again; silverware chinks on dishes . . . But glance around. Do you see the man and woman seated at a single table separated by a low, dividing wall? The

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couple by the plastic flowers? Watch them. They do not talk. . . . The waitress sets plates of food in front of them. He stares at his. His wife (she is his wife) smooths and smooths the napkin on her lap while the food is placed. The waitress smiles. The woman smiles. The man does not. They eat. . . . Steadily the man cuts the meat. Efficiently he pokes the pieces in his mouth, his fork upside down. He chews, gazing at his plate. . . . It is curious that the woman should be overweight, because she takes such tiny bites. She fidgets her peas, sips water, darts her eyes around the room, picks chicken with her little finger arched, pats her mouth with the napkin, smooths it on her lap—sighs. Every bite is nibbled to death, as though she chews with her front teeth only. . . . He is done long before she is. So he sits sideways at the table with his thumbs hooked in his belt. Now he stares at nothing, at no one. His eyes are lost in middle distance. When he thinks of it, he blows on his coffee and drinks. But the woman—her nervous gestures have multiplied, intensified. When anyone passes them, she looks up, looks down immediately, smiles too late, then blanks her face. She is an anthill of twitchy motion. Through furious embarrassment, she orders dessert. She attempts a joke about ice cream, cheese, and apple pie; the waitress smiles indulgence. The man clears his throat, gazing away, uncommitted. . . . When they rise to go, the man is not one whit changed from the solemn fellow who first sat down. . . . she checks and rechecks the table to see whether they forgot something, while her husband marches directly toward the cashier. Finally, she follows. This is how they regularly walk together: she follows.¹

1. Walter Wangerin, *As For Me and My House* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 151–52.

This would be painful enough if they were simply having a bad night. But Wangerin describes this as their “date night.” The couple “treats themselves” to a café dinner like this every Saturday. So this is their anticipated diversion, the fevered high point of their entire week. This is how they satisfy their marital urge to be together. Imagine what transpires alone between them in the bedroom, if you dare such a gloomy shudder.

The image is upsetting on many fronts. We are disarmed by the man’s utter lack of personal presence and attention, never mind anything like emotional investment, to make something worthwhile out of their “date.” It is spooky how missing in action he is. More inscrutably, I suspect he likely imagines he is already “doing his part” as the guy, what with being provider, protector and changer of light bulbs. Perhaps he is so absent because he wants sex, doesn’t get it, remains clueless, and feels cheated. Resentment could well lurk hidden underneath his distance. After all, he has “done his part,” right?

He hasn’t figured out it is not about wanting sex. Sex is not the point. It is about wanting another human being as the love of our life, the focus of lifelong devotion, our passion’s pulse, our one and only partner, our God-given cherished mate. Find real love together and sex flows ineluctably from what we share. Seek sex while bracketing love—single, married, or whatever—and distance enters in ways that should scare the daylights out of all of us.

It is sad and pathetic how empty, shaken, and uncertain the woman is. Her example clarifies how our outer and inner lives connect. Starved of affection and attraction, she also lives without anything like confidence. Not surprisingly, she fills herself with calories to fill inner emotional and spiritual voids she neglects. She doesn’t know if she matters. So she doesn’t know who she is. She doesn’t know what she wants. She doesn’t know which way to turn. She is unsure of whom and what she can count upon. She is lost and unaware of the spectacle she has become. Depression would be no surprise for such a woman, per-

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haps diagnosed as “a clinical disorder.” This is ironic. Rather than “disorder,” depression seems the natural consequence of living such a life while having to project it to others as normal, meaningful, and fulfilling.

This snapshot raises bigger questions about aging and intimacy, about loving and the inevitability of life’s shining moments receding from us. Must the bright floral accents of brimming, ardent, youthful love necessarily fade as we amass decades together? This question is increasingly important, as we live longer than ever. Must what was once living and vibrant become as brittle and lifeless as the plastic flowers in Denny’s? We need to find ways to remain animated and lively together, lest key people and relationships become increasingly disposable, and loneliness gain an upper hand.

Some assume aging necessarily means becoming bigger and heavier, duller and blanker, slower and blander. In the same way, some assume our shared passion as men and women must also inevitably wither, dry, and scatter to the winds. Some expect this outright as established truth of generations past, and then fulfill the prophecy because it is “supposed to happen.” And here is another sad truth. Some couples are actually relieved by the falling off of interest in sex, what with passion making relentless demands of mutual interest, engagement, growth, and aliveness. Frankly, some never knew “what the big deal was” about sex and soldiered through the motions, erotically. Aging becomes a convenient excuse to exit that life for tamer and less imposing pastimes—like bingo, bridge, knitting, or watching afternoon television.

God bless the exceptions who refuse to submit to a misplaced sense of destiny. In effect, such couples as these refuse to bow down and worship the glamour idol of youth. They will not submit to the message that sex is—wink, wink, nod, nod—only for the young and the adored, only for the supple and the sensational. Such couples defy tired, misleading elder stereotypes like “the insatiable widow,” “the dirty, lecherous old man,” “the predatory cougar” or “the burnt-out old fart.” The hidden counterculture

of their passion contradicts the destructive myth that we naturally must “mature out of sex.”

Despite how popular culture mocks the persistence of passion into maturity, such couples as these find ways to witness that aging need not contradict being sensual, and that sexual satisfaction need not decrease with years. In truth, it often *increases* with age. Such beneath-the-radar couples who discover this amaze us as their lifelong passion lends a youthfulness that defies the seeming omnipotence of years, gives them the timeless grace of life’s fullness, and radiates a warm glow that naturally attracts us. So much of thinking this through is still new to us. Sex and aging was hardly studied until Masters and Johnson finally got around to it in 1966.

Honestly, I don’t believe most couples would enter the promised solidarity of a shared lifetime if they saw the Denny’s scenario as a possible outcome in their lives. No, they would turn and flee, men to the labor camps, women to the nunneries. But let’s be honest about how common it is. We need not look far to see this sadness. Only just listen to the couple in the next booth, talking past and ignoring one another. How tender and sweet is their lovemaking? How creative and playful? How ardent and satisfying?

So many building blocks assemble to create a relationship and to keep it strong, vibrant, and defiant of the years. We are talking about attentiveness, tenderness, constancy, forgiveness, forbearance, kindness, compassion, whimsy, imagination and then encompassing love to wrap it all into a package. Take each other for granted for more than a season of surviving something, and you both become vulnerable to serious slippage. Fade gently over time into taking each other for granted, letting apathy become the norm, and before you know it, you’re toast. Indifference is the silent, cruel neglect that remains invisible as a form of abuse we think we can get away with.

The 2012 film *Hope Springs*, mentioned previously in this work, dynamically expands the Denny’s scene by offering up some

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difficult but real alternatives to living in marital purgatory. Meryl Streep and Tommy Lee Jones excel as Kay and Arnold Soames. As the movie opens, Kay is in the bathroom mirror, nervously fussing over her hair and fixing her modest blue negligee. She wants to make love with Arnold. It has been all of four years since the last time they were intimate. She slips into “his bedroom.” His incredulous look says, “Well, what do you want?” Kay stammers, “I want. . . . I want . . .” As Arnold realizes that she beckons him to his conjugal duty as a husband, he dismissively buries his face in the paper. “I’m not feeling well,” he mutters. This Nebraska couple is sleepwalking through their marriage.

Kay is not unlike the woman in the opening Denny’s scene, lacking in confidence, twitchy and lost, emotionally and sensually starved. But Kay differs in a key regard: she won’t accept it anymore. “When did you last touch me when it wasn’t for a photo?” she asks him. “I want a marriage again,” she calmly declares more than once, implying that the absence of physical intimacy is completely unacceptable. Kay decides to seek intensive marital couples counseling on the coast of Maine. “I’m not going,” Arnold responds. “Go by yourself.” Much to his surprise, she does. Arnold joins her mostly because he doesn’t know what else to do. He complains all of the way there and denies any need for a therapist, or a “quack,” like Bernie Feld, credibly played by Steve Carell.

Most of the movie is the couples’ interaction with Bernie in therapy and the exercises he assigns for their private time. At one point, Bernie leans in and asks, “Is this the best you can do?” The answer is obvious in the asking: clearly not. Arnold is plodding and truculent. Kay is afraid but heroically determined in the face of discouragement. In a fit of pique, Kay storms away from therapy and plops down in a pub. After Kay’s confesses why they are visiting Maine, the barmaid spontaneously asks the gathered patrons, “All right, who in here is not having sex?” Most of the hands go up in a show of widespread, genial, and vexing underachievement. Clearly, they are not alone.

Kay's and Arnold's progress is slow and uneven. Progress is grudging but efforts are made. Sometimes their two steps backward make the three steps forward feel like very hard-earned ground. In the final analysis, they both show up when it matters most, neither gives up on the other again. Breakthroughs begin to dot their landscape. Arnold eventually opens up enough to tell of a daring fantasy: sharing his bed with Kay *and* the neighbor lady who walks her two Welsh Corgis by their house. You find *her* attractive? Kay is taken aback but welcomes Arnold's vulnerability without judging him. After all, it is only a fantasy, a contrivance of forbiddenness, a naughty fiction that might inspire him.

In a humorous moment, back home in Nebraska, that very neighbor lady goes walking by their place the day after they return, this time walking with *three* Corgis, symbolism duly noted. They exchange pleasant greetings and briefly catch up. Kay invites the lady over to hear about the couple's trip to Maine. As soon as she is out of earshot, Kay pivots toward Arnold and smiles, "Don't you even begin to think about it!"

But back in Nebraska, things aren't so good. The two want to implement in their daily routine what they have learned as a couple. This proves no small feat. The inertia of their former divided and dispassionate life again encroaches and envelops them. Seemingly, they are back at square one. Kay packs her suitcase to dog-sit for a work friend as a pretext for getting out of the house, even out of the marriage. She almost picks it up and walks many times. Arnold still lives in his own bedroom. Yet as he walks by Kay's bedroom, he pauses to stare at the doorknob, and imagine the mysteries that lie beyond. He truly wants to open it. Kay resists bailing. Arnold finally grasps the knob and opens the door. It happens before they have reached that point of no return as a couple.

Tender embraces give rise to warm and natural lovemaking, just what they were looking for, just what was eluding them. It is as though the accumulated efforts have suddenly paid off just as all seemed lost. Who knows why it didn't happen sooner? Who

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knows why it happened then? But the cosmic tumblers suddenly fall into place for them, not coincidentally, after a lot of effort and work. The entire movie we wonder if they will make it as a married couple. The next day, in the simple rituals of breakfast and parting, it is clear they are at a whole new place. And then later, as the credits roll, Kay's fantasy comes true. The daylight they have sought now finally shines on Arnold and Kay at the Maine beach, as they renew marriage vows. In this moment, we see how their promises to be more understanding and considerate feed directly into the rekindled heat they share as a man and a woman.

Summing up the Beatitudes, Jesus said, "Seek first the kingdom of God, and these other things shall be added." The correlate for passion in marriage is, seek first to love in detailed and encompassing ways, and then see if you can't keep your hands off each other. Of course, it is never that simple, is it? To come alive again inwardly, a couple's shared fire must be remembered, respected, nurtured, planned, stoked, restrained, rekindled, rehearsed, and replenished. This is what we mean as we say how much work a marriage is. Such intimacies are daunting to engage, even with those we love. Kay and Arnold's antics remind us that authentic, deep, and carefully nurtured love is the royal road to hot sex, not so much the other way around.

So tell me something, having heard the story of Kay and Arnold. How would you have me respond as pastor to one couple in a church I once served? They were well-to-do, owners of their own business, parents to growing children, and respected leaders in the community. One night the police arrested them for having sex in their car, off in some dark corner of a parking lot. Do I tell them what a bad example they are? What a disappointment to their children? How their irresponsibility reflects badly on their church? Careful, now, about being quick to judge. First listen very closely to their hearts of hearts, and know what they are up against. Or do I congratulate them for not giving up? For pressing against the borders that might hem them in? For striking a blow

for liberty just as they needed to break out? Before you answer, consider this also.

I am struck how Paul the Apostle constantly charges the far-flung churches of his epistles, urging them to be controlled, prudent, disciplined, restrained, discreet, sober, and circumspect. While it is good to hear that we are first of God, and not of the world, to learn that we belong to Jesus Christ and not to other idolatrous powers eager to coopt us—thank you, Paul!—we might also be mindful of another fine line we step over.

When fear takes root and we live overly controlled and controlling lives, we can stultify imagination in a way that quenches passion, in a way that quashes footloose joy and gladness. In being good and dutiful, we can drain all of the air, light and festivity from our lives, thinking God blesses what we are doing, all the while. It happens in dozens of little ways. It is how the aforementioned decency brigades form. And it is closer to the goodness of the Pharisees than the goodness of Jesus, as the gospel stories well illustrate who Jesus hung around with and how he responded to them.

Arnold and Kay became prisoners of their unimaginative routine and plodding habits, perhaps imagining that was putting them in good stead with God. It was the same egg every morning, the same bland hellos at work every day, and the same snoring from Arnold in his Barcalounger every night, with ESPN droning. It felt safe to live in a stable, narrow range of choices, a monotonous rut. It is like carbon monoxide to a relationship, invisible and dangerous. Fortunately, Kay modestly but determinedly forced them out of that rut by creating a crisis and throwing them both into the dilemma for which their shared intimacy could be the only answer.

We should note that Paul also means for us to live lives of creative engagement with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is not about austerity and privation. The Spirit also teems with surprise, breaking boundaries, busting categories, injecting new colors in

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the tired sepia of selfsame obligation played out within daily routines. The Holy Spirit blows where it will in surprising ways.

So as people of faith, we also ask, where might our passion for our beloved exceed its banks, spill out and over into the rest of our lives, saturate our respectable work clothes, drench us with erotic wetness that shakes us loose and undresses us for a spontaneous skinny-dipping with our beloved? Funny, isn't it, how no one has to commend such impulses in our exploratory youth. They naturally occur to us. Funny how sometimes we need to find permission again to become who we once were, and then forgot. This is the renewing nature of the Holy Spirit, with power to tamp us down in one moment and also to explode artificial barriers, holding us back, in the next moment.

In other words, the third person of the Trinity is surprising, enigmatic, and paradoxical in its holiness. The same Holy Spirit that offers us secure foundations also bids us to risk breaking the mold as life becomes utterly prepackaged. The same Holy Spirit that Paul commends to Corinth to button them down in their disturbing excesses can then come back around when we least expect it to unbutton our stark austerity, to commend youthful playfulness, to fan our playful exuberance and exploration.

The message is clear. Sharing bland, routinized, mechanical sex is not pleasing to God. Refraining from sex is not necessarily a holier way to live. And breaking outside the box to live playfully and without fetters like Adam and Eve in the garden is not displeasing to God. God created that garden and it was all God ever wanted for us. God wants it for us still. Let's be careful not to stereotype God, put God in a box, make God predictable and boring, and then call that Christianity and morality. Do not do that or you will have to liberate yourself from the prison where you have placed God and yourself.

CHAPTER 15 FEMALE COUNTERPOINT

VERLEE A. COPELAND

Contentment is not the same thing as complacency, is it? It's so hard, when gazing upon the behaviors of other people, to imagine what goes on in their hidden lives. It seems fair, however, to assume that the couple in the opening illustration has grown distant and bored with one another, if not with life. It saddens us to watch their empty interaction when we know what they have forgotten, how much more dynamic and fulfilling life can be. They have perhaps lost sight of the rich possibility of enjoying the love of one's life.

On the other hand, when a seasoned couple enjoy deep contentment with one another, their silences become neither empty nor sad. Deep silence then resonates all manner of unspoken intimacies and the sweet comfort of certain familiarity and routine. Unfortunately, we do not see that here. You observe that the wife fills herself with calories to feed a hidden emotional and spiritual void. Our tendency as human creatures is to reach for all manner of temporary satisfactions to fill a God-shaped hole that can only be satisfied by the Holy One. As early church theologian Augustine once famously said, "There is no rest until we rest in Thee." Whether we fill our sadness with calories or alcohol or sport or hobby or even a pretty good relationship, anything can become a false god. The emptiness that we experience can be satisfied by God alone. The loves of our lives can only hint at that for which we pray: "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day, our daily bread."

The road back from the dull co-existence that passes here for marriage may begin with the call to faith renewal. You invite us to refrain from putting God in a box as if that were our decision to make. We don't shape God, but rather God shapes us, and re-

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forms our tired relationships for good when we're open to it. As often as not, the re-vitalization of life and love begins in the church pew in worship or on our knees in prayer as well as in the bedroom. Blessed by God, any ordinary place can become the holy ground on which God resurrects our weary and wounded relationship to new life.