

A Christian Perspective

Kevin McClone, Psy. D.



“What is healthy sexuality rooted in a Christian perspective?” This is a question that has been in the background for much of my work as the Director of the Institute for Sexuality Studies. Having the honor of hearing many of the psychosexual journeys of lay and religious men and women from around the world, it is clear that sexuality is often both the most graced and wounded area of our lives. For some the wound is much more pronounced, for others the grace becomes more evident. Yet both are generally part of the mosaic of our psychosexual narrative. Reflecting on these psychosexual narratives I would like to explore qualities that seem to contribute to a more healthy sexuality within a Christian perspective and present several guiding elements for consideration.

A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN PERSON

First of all, healthy sexuality within a Christian anthropology must deal with who we are and how we relate to God as we grow on our psychosexual journey. In other words, healthy and holy sexuality is rooted in our Christian understanding of the human person. As persons created in the image of God, we have dignity and worth and are called to share fully in a relational covenant of love. This covenantal aspect at the heart of our Christian belief calls us to love self, others, our world and the God of our longing. In our Christian religious tradition it is firmly believed that human beings are made in the image and likeness of God. It is in and through that image that we are called to live out our sacred gift of sexuality in a way that honors self, others and God. This will

involve a growing appreciation for both the positive and destructive aspects of our sexual nature, or what I like to refer to as the grace and the wound of our sexuality.

This psychosexual journey begins with a growing self-knowledge and acceptance and leads to a more secure self-identity. This self-identity is further enhanced by a growing acceptance of the fullness of our sexual selves that allows us to risk authentic intimacy with others and God. Each stage of this journey brings new developmental challenges and sexual health will demand attention to each particular life cycle challenge. So sexual health at childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, mid-life, and in older ages may appear quite different.

Separateness and autonomy are key to healthy adult intimacy and affective maturity. I cannot be together

with you unless I have some sense of autonomy and separateness that I often discover in moments of real solitude. Navigating solitude draws us deeper into our true self, unveiling the masks and shadow selves that only serve to block spontaneity, freedom, and authentic loving. So to love another or to draw close to another in bonds of intimate connection or friendship demands a healthy acceptance of our true self. To the degree that I grow to love the person I am becoming I am more able to share that authentic self with another.

HEALTHY SEXUALITY INVOLVES THE WHOLE PERSON

Secondly, healthy sexuality must involve the whole person. Healthy sexuality must go beyond more popular secularized notions of sexuality that narrowly focus on genital sexuality. Any healthy sexuality from a Christian anthropological perspective then will need to address the whole person—body, heart, mind and spirit—within the context of all their relationships. Many have begun to realize that God intends increasing sexual wholeness to be part of our redemption. As Christians, sexuality is a fundamental expression of who we are. It touches our core as individuals. When our sexual energy becomes properly channeled and directed, it can lead to generative acts of love and intimacy that build up the human community.

Yet, when this same sexual energy gets entangled with our needs to cope with stress, to avoid pain, to manage our moods, to manage our relationships or to protect a fragile ego, we end up using sexual energy more instinctively and at times more compulsively or addictively. One example is the phenomenon of “hooking up,” practiced by some teenagers and college students. It is “sex without strings attached” and can become a way to manage one’s sexuality while avoiding close relationships and commitment. I recall how some men that I have worked with in counseling

who struggled with sexual addiction told me that after years of sexual healing and recovery, they realized despite their years of genital intimacy, that they had really no clue about what real intimacy was. For many of them, sex became more about a way to deal with anxiety, stress, fear and avoiding pain than seeking pleasure, fulfillment or real intimacy.

Body

I would like to briefly explore each of these holistic dimensions—body, heart and mind. The physical dimension of sexuality is rooted in the incarnational message of embodiment or the Word made flesh. This means the body with its feelings, thoughts, urges and longings is a place of divine revelation rather than something to be feared or an object of shame. So to be growing in this area will involve a deepening appreciation, respect, and comfort for my bodily demands. Evelyn and James Whitehead capture this message well when they state,

*What Christians hope for today is a return to the best beliefs in the Incarnation: in the flesh we meet God; in our bodies the power of God stirs; our sexuality is an ordinary medium through which God’s love moves to touch, to create, to heal (*Wisdom of the Body*, 9).*

Many individuals who seem to struggle with this area have difficulty recognizing and caring for their bodily needs. Whether it be getting enough rest, eating healthily, exercising or living a more balanced lifestyle, they fail to become more intimate with their embodied selves. How attuned am I to my level of physical stress? Do I value my hobbies and have creative outside interests? What about healthy friendships? Do I cultivate a solitude in my life that allows for deeper relating in more real and honest ways? Unfortunately, for many persons who have been wounded through past hurts in relationships,

including sexual abuse, the result is often sexual shame or discomfort with one’s physical body.

Heart

What about the affective dimension of the heart? Sexual health as it relates to the heart implies embracing the whole range of feelings and emotions that we have as embodied persons. Emotional and affective maturity is genuinely hard work that begins with identifying, understanding and expressing a wide array of emotions that foster healthy relationships. This implies cultivating openness to others in mutual respect and a growing willingness to develop skills of self-disclosure, listening and empathy. Ultimately, my growth in affective maturity will flow out of a genuine awareness and appreciation of my strengths and limitations and the capacity to open myself up more deeply to others.

All our emotions are meant to move us in some direction as signified by the root word *emote*, meaning “to move.” Healthy sexuality involves becoming more aware of the movement of our desires, passions and longings as energy to attend to discernment. How can I properly direct this energy if I don’t allow myself to experience it? To grow in love is to experience love, joy and peace but also the anger, loss, hurt and letting go that flow from any disciplined committed love. All human beings experience loneliness sometimes despite perhaps having close friendships and intimate bonds. Growth at each stage of our psychosexual journey implies some capacity to grieve in order to move on to deeper levels of relating.

Healthy sexuality will involve a growing capacity to develop friendships at a variety of levels with same age peers. This implies that no one or two people will be able to meet all of our emotional or relational needs. I may have some close friends with whom I can share deeply, some friends and family that are supportive but where there is less

frequent contact, and others who nourish me but at a more distant level and without long term commitment. Friberg and Laaser in their model of healthy sexuality identify these three levels as primary, secondary, and tertiary relationships which are all important to maintain.

Mind

What about the mind and sexuality? In my experience, one of the most underdeveloped sexual organs is the brain. Problems often arise in the sexual sphere of our lives either because we think too little about our sexuality or are preoccupied far too much. Either extreme can easily lead to ill health in the area of sexuality. On the one end, anxiety and fear of sexuality leads to avoidance of closeness with others (asexuality) and at the other end it can lead to acting out impulsively (hypersexuality) out of anxiety, fear or shame. Healthy sexuality seeks to avoid these two extremes by fostering a more balanced style of relating that reflects deeper integration of body, heart, mind and spirit.

In the cognitive dimension of our sexuality, we are challenged to examine our real thoughts, perceptions and misperceptions about sexuality. What is my actual knowledge of sexuality including a healthy awareness of body, heart, mind and spiritual aspects of sexuality? For example, how do I think about my sexuality? What messages did I receive about sexuality growing up? How have these messages either enhanced or inhibited my psychosexual health? Am I growing to become more honest and comfortable with my attractions, longings, and intimacy struggles? What are the messages and thoughts that guide my choices in relationships? Are they based on a genuine concern for the spiritual good of myself and the other or are they more of the need-seeking instinctual kind where I seek to lose myself in the other? Can I distinguish between sexual

desires, fantasies and behaviors? Are there persons with whom I can share honestly my struggles with intimacy?

AVOIDING DUALISM

Healthy sexuality implies avoiding the sexual dualism that has marked much of the Christian tradition. Dualism is the false perception that spirit is opposed to body, with spirit assumed to be higher and superior and the body lower and inferior. While many have embraced the notion of embodiment, many have not and still denigrate or are suspicious of the wisdom of their bodies as sources of revelation. Unfortunately, one companion of this dualism has been sexism or patriarchy: where men identify themselves essentially with the spirit (mind), they identify women with the body (matter), and assume that the higher mind controls the lower body. This has led to unhealthy attitudes that block genuine collaboration between the sexes. Healthy sexuality will involve a growing capacity to relate with both men and women in more genuine and collaborative ways and to appreciate the masculine and feminine dimensions within each of us as true gifts.

If Christians were better able to honestly reflect and examine their sexual thoughts and perceptions in light of gospel values, healthier attitudes might result. When our sexuality is integrated with the best of our spiritual motives, our attitudes about sexuality can be changed in the direction of more healthy attitudes. One healthy attitude is mutual respect, whereby our relationships are marked by both activity and receptivity or giving and receiving. This mutuality is embodied in equal relationships where each person is treated with dignity and respect and avoids relationships of domination or objectification. Margaret Farley reminds us that “if the power differential is too great, dependency will limit freedom, and mutuality will go awry” (Farley, 223).

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To think and feel sexual can be a wonderful gift if it serves to inform our loving in life-giving and respectful ways. Another way to say this is that we seek to grow toward assertive sexuality that avoids the extremes of passive sexuality, asexuality, hypersexuality or more aggressive and invasive forms of relating. With assertive sexuality I realize that I have a right and responsibility to both recognize and embrace my sexual thoughts and feelings with their bodily genital stirrings, while choosing how to respond in line with the commitments that form my life's values. This healthy sexuality involves a growing respect for both my boundaries and those of others. If I am growing in sexually healthy behaviors then I am more aware of how to be assertive rather than passive or aggressive in my sexual responses.

The key is integrity with that with which I most deeply value. I have found Capuchin-priest Keith Clark's distinction of "sexual responsiveness versus sexual pursuits" as insightful here. What I hear Clark saying is that we can actually delight in our sensuality and sexuality (sexual responsiveness)

and still make thoughtful choices about how best to respond in line with that which we most deeply value (sexual behaviors or pursuits). To be sexual in a healthy way is to always realize that I have a choice as to how to best direct my sexual energy. Love is a verb not a noun. Yet we often speak more of "falling in love" which implies a certain passive, involuntary experience. Movement toward greater sexual health will open me up more freely to the erotic and sensual in all of life, but in a way that becomes sacramental by aligning sexual behaviors with my deepest values.

GROWTH IN INTIMACY

Next, sexual health for an adult Christian demands ongoing growth in intimacy and affective maturity. For Christians then, intimacy is not an option, but rather as Wilke Au and Noreen Cannon put it, intimacy is "the hallmark of the Christian life." This involves developing the skills that allow for true intimacy with self, others and God. As Christians we are called to experience ourselves as the beloved of

God and to embrace others just as we have ourselves been so intimately embraced by God. We meet and reveal God who is love only through one another. This gift of intimacy is both a mark of maturity and a fruit of the spirit. It is a psychosexual journey that involves growing skills and capacities for more mature loving, yet is also a divine mystery and a gift of God.

A precursor to healthy adult intimacy with others is self-intimacy. All the skills of intimacy such as honest self-disclosure, trust, openness and respect flow out of growth in self-intimacy. In other words, I need an authentic self to give truly of myself in generative acts of love and care for others. This self becomes more real as I shed the masks and false idols that block honest sharing, disclosure, and true awareness of myself and the other.

For how can I share who I am if I do not know who I am? While I may have some adequate knowledge of my personal and familial history, I may still have trouble accepting this self that I am coming to know more deeply. One aspect that is crucial here is the willingness to embrace one's wounds,

mistakes and limitations. This calls for a sexual ethic that avoids excessive judgment and moralism that only serves to increase unhealthy shame. It seems to me that those who are growing in healthy intimacy have learned through time to become more accepting of their strengths and also of their wounds and limitations, and have let go of the need to live up to other's expectations. This inner freedom allows for greater spontaneity and less self-consciousness. Developmental theorists writing on intimacy suggest that any healthy adult intimacy involves the capacity to share more of one's authentic self with a trusted other. Having close relationships of mutual trust frees us to be more real, to let go of the need for pretense and reveal our true selves.

While intimacy may be a noble goal, many persons may have real difficulty in trusting others due to past wounds or violations of trust growing up. Indeed, one of the biggest obstacles to growth in intimacy is the fear of taking the risk to trust others. These fears may stem from multiple past hurts, traumas, or rejection experiences in relationships—be it in families, religious communities or church environments. Without facing the pain, loss and challenges of growing up in our relational lives, we can stay stuck in old familiar patterns out of fear, anxiety and shame.

True intimacy within a Christian perspective involves genuine concern for the spiritual good of the other. This is a relationship rooted in a growing capacity for honesty and trust. This will involve particular friendships and intimate others that nourish our own commitments. It is the antithesis of the un-real, the idol, the lust, or mere sentimentality. Real intimacy mirrors who we really are right back at us; it challenges us to be even more than we are. True intimacy is, in short, a confrontation with reality as it really is, rather than how we might wish it to be. So growing in healthy intimacy is about becoming more real. Part of this happens as we experience psychosexual transitions in

life including the challenges, sufferings and hardships that life presents. To become more real involves facing the false self that would shield us from our true self. Here the obstacles may be shame, fear, perfectionism, low self-esteem and all sorts of self-deceptions that keep our authentic self hidden.

Just Love

In my experience, people are hungering for a healthy and holy understanding of sexuality that promotes loving and life-giving relationships. A healthy sexuality will involve making healthy, creative choices about one's life in relationship rooted in core values of justice and love. Margaret Farley aptly captures this notion of healthy sexuality in her book *Just Love* when she states:

If sexuality is to be creative and not destructive in personal and social relationships, then there is no substitute for discerning ever more carefully the norms whereby it will be just (Farley, 232).

She goes on further to articulate the norms of just love that include the following seven principles: Do no unjust harm, free consent of partners, mutuality, equality, commitment, fruitfulness and social justice. Many of these principles I have already spoken of in different ways, but social justice adds a unique new dimension worth elaborating. This norm, as Farley denotes it, derives from our obligation to respect relationality, but even more than this, it derives from the obligation to respect all persons as ends in themselves, to respect their autonomy and relationality, and thus not to harm them but to support them. So whether persons are single or married, gay or straight, bisexual or ambiguously gendered, old or young, abled or challenged in the ordinary forms of sexual expression, they have claims to respect from the Christian community as well as the wider society (Farley, 228).

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This just love approach will involve a growing capacity to resist unhealthy cultural influences that would degrade the sanctity of our sexual nature. In other words, we take a stance against any form of sexual abuse or harassment, the growing eight billion dollar pornography industry, cybersex, prostitution, and sexual human trafficking as destructive to our God-given gift of sexuality as these abuses alienate us from who we are called to be.

Actually, Christian theology at its best has recognized that sin is not fundamentally an act, but rather the condition of alienation or estrangement out of which harmful acts may arise. However, it has taken a long time for theology to acknowledge that sexual sin is fundamentally alienation from our divinely intended sexuality. James Nelson, a professor of Christian ethics, captured this sentiment when he wrote in his article on reuniting sexuality and spirituality; "To put it overly simply but I hope accurately: sexual sin lies not in being too sexual, but in being not sexual enough—in the way God has intended us to be" (Nelson, p. 187-190). Sexual wholeness and healing happen when persons are challenged to move away from fear of sexuality into a healthy embrace of the fullness of sacred sexuality. Some of the obstacles to more passionate living are fear, shame, anxiety, and compulsive patterns of escape. Our allies in psychosexual growth are trust, openness, and a healthy disciplined love that nurtures the commitments of our lives honoring the self, others and God.

Questions to explore here might be: Do I seek to align my sexuality with God's call to love? Do I live in a way that is consistent with my spiritual values? What role does my faith play in dealing with sexual relationships? Is my behavior a choice that honors the commitments I have made or does it draw me away from those commitments? All of these areas affect one another. In other words, as I grow to appreciate

and attend to my body more, I find that my relationships with others are often less stressed or compromised. Or correspondingly, as I nurture the close relationships and friendships in my life, I find myself better able to manage and cope with life and nurture a balanced care of self.

ROOTED IN REAL LIFE

Healthy sexuality will be rooted in our real lived experiences in relationship and involves a developmental journey. This implies that context is key. So sexual health for a teenager may appear much differently than for an older adult. Psychologists remind us that developmentally we experience a “normal narcissism” when we are children and even as teens, but that as we enter adulthood we are challenged to be less self-preoccupied and more mutual and generative in our loving. As we mature healthy sexuality involves a growing capacity to relate in less self-conscious and need-seeking ways. It produces more generative and unselfish acts of life-giving and lovemaking. As human beings we are in a dynamic process of development in our relational journeys and will inevitably make mistakes and experience wounds in ourselves and others.

AN INTERRELATED WHOLE

Finally, all of the dimensions of healthy sexuality are interrelated. For example if a person has not resolved certain sexual issues, like past sexual wounds or trauma, it will affect all other dimensions in some ways. Wholeness and holiness derive from the same root and healthy sexuality calls us to the best of both. When all of the dimensions of my sexuality are growing, I am becoming more loving in the way God calls me to be. Likewise, each area of sexuality that is neglected or underdeveloped compromises our growth in other areas. Relationally, the person may be withdrawn and unable

to disclose important parts of his or her past. Behaviorally, past unhealed sexual wounds may lead to various addictive and compulsive dysfunctional escapes used to avoid feelings. Physically, the genital sexual relationship may be impaired, and physical care compromised, not to mention various psychosomatic complaints that are possible. Spiritually, a person’s ability to trust may be impaired particularly in those cases in which the perpetrator is a religious authority.

More positively, if a person is sexually healthy in one dimension there can be a positive impact on the other areas. For example, relational intimacy with a close friend makes it less likely that a person will look for unhealthy ways to meet their unmet intimacy needs. Likewise, if one aspect of our sexuality precedes maturation in another area, problems may develop. For example, part of the difficulty young people often face with integrating their sexuality is that physical maturing often precedes the healthy sexual dimensions of cognitive, emotional and spiritual maturity. This can lead to premature sexual acting out or genital intimacy before emotional maturity occurs, leading to further wounds in relationships. Likewise, many religious men may be highly developed intellectually and cognitively, yet lack the emotional self-awareness and affective maturity necessary for fuller integration. In sum, the truth of our growth in relationships is that they are often messy, mistakes are inevitably made, and it’s not always so clear what the right choices are. But if we are seeking to grow into greater sexual health we will be gradually more comfortable and confident with the way that sexuality is a part of all the many dimensions of our lives: body, heart, mind and spirit.

RECOMMENDED READING

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Kevin P. McClone, Psy.D., is a licensed clinical psychologist and director of the Institute for Sexuality Studies located on the campus of Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. He has worked for more than twenty years in the teaching, counseling and health care fields.

