



## **Readings II in Faith & Science**

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### **Holistic Sexuality -- A Proper Focus for the Scientist?**

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## Holistic Sexuality -- A Proper Focus for the Scientist?

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Science takes nothing on faith. All suppositions must be examined objectively and tested for validity.

Yet, the area of human sexual behavior is not expected to adhere either to the demands of faith, nor to enlightened self-interest. When students enter college, the first thing they hear at Student Health is how to “protect themselves.” As upwards of 80% of unmarried students are reported to be sexually active, it is presumed that this information will be needed. While the presumption may be on target, thoughtful people think about their actions rather than being carried along by group-think or group-feel.

What is the purpose of sexual relations? What does one expect to receive from a relationship? What does one expect to bring to a relationship? How does one talk about these issues?

When physicians encounter young people who have entered genital relationships and found that they were either pregnant or had contracted a sexually transmitted disease, they hear that these questions were never asked. Why not? Are we too busy? Or perhaps too shy? Do we think the answers are so obvious that one doesn't need to ask? Rather than pursue the line followed by the health services which do not ask about the quality of relationships but restrict themselves to damage control, why not begin at the beginning?

When a human relationship includes sexual intercourse, it uses the person's body. The body is not merely a tool for the expression of feeling, rather it is the biological reality of the living person. It has a truth of its own. When the normal bodily function is not well served, for instance by inappropriate nutrition or sleep patterns, too much exercise or lack of exercise, the person's health is impaired. Sexual acts also have consequences. Basically, sex is about babies. While today's mindset suggests that “modern” contraception can insure sex without babies, the truth is otherwise. There is no totally effective contraceptive. When two persons of reproductive age and opposite sex have intercourse often enough, pregnancy will occur even if one or both have been sterilized. It will not occur to everybody, but statistically, sooner or later, one encounters pregnancies in spite of all contraception. This statement is even truer for sexually transmitted diseases. Because of the anatomy of the act, serious disease, particularly AIDS, is transmitted eight times more frequently from men to women than from women to men. But the risk is always there.

One of the ways to approach human sexuality is to begin to understand the biology of the reproductive system of the male and female. It is enlightening to see that textbooks refer to these systems as the reproductive system, recognizing their essential function, and yet human sexuality is not limited to reproduction nor is sexual interest limited to procreation. Catholic teaching is clear - the sexual act has two inseparable purposes: the perfection of mutual love and the procreation of children.

But still many people ask -- why not have sex when two people are in love, but not yet married? Why not use a contraceptive when a couple has as many children as they can responsibly raise, or are not yet ready to start a family?

What is involved when two people are truly in love? One of the basic components of love is acceptance of the partner as he or she truly is, not as the other would imagine them to be, or would like them to be. This includes acceptance of the fertility of the partner. Men are fertile from puberty to old age while women are fertile when they have an egg available. Women's bodies signal the beginning of their fertile phase by the production of a mucus discharge from the cervix, which women can be taught to feel and see at the opening of the vagina, or birth canal, at the vulva. When this mucus is felt or seen, the couple's fertility begins because the mucus will keep sperm alive in the woman's body until the egg leaves the ovary (ovulation). Fertility continues for three days after the ovulatory peak of the mucus.

Recognition of these patterns must be taught by a competent teacher. When couples understand their fertility pattern, either by the mucus sign as the sole index, or by adding the rise in basal temperature which signals the completion of the fertile phase, that couple can choose whether to try to procreate or not with any given sexual act. If they want a baby, they use the fertile time, if not, they wait. However, there is a great deal more to learning about one's cyclic fertility than only knowing whether or not to have a baby. Both men and women have hormonal fluctuations. The man's testosterone begins to rise about 3:00 AM, reaches its height at 11:00 AM, plateaus until 3:00 PM and declines progressively until 11:00 PM. The woman has a monthly cycle. The first half of the cycle until the mucus peak is dominated by estrogen, while the second half is under the control of progesterone. As a generalization, women tend to be more even-tempered and outgoing in the estrogenic phase, perhaps because estrogen also releases endorphins. In the progestational phase, women tend to be a bit more artistic and introspective. There are two relative androgen peaks during the cycle, one at ovulation and one premenstrually. At these times, women feel an increase in libido. In the premenstrual phase, they may also feel a bit more impatient, or if the irritation is turned inward, depressed.

To understand themselves better, women can link their emotional with their hormonal patterns. The latter are readily learned by charting the monthly fertility cycle. It's also helpful to know that various forms of emotional or physical stress can stop ovulation, and in severe cases, menstruation as well. Thus, an understanding of one's ovulatory pattern becomes one's first stress meter. Too many exams, too many papers, a break-up of a relationship, a death in the family can all produce an anovulatory cycle. Rapid weight loss or sudden increase in exercise can also stop ovulation, and sometimes, menstruation.

The effort required to make the daily observations of the woman's mucus pattern is minimal and greatly helped if she can find a teacher of natural family planning, or participate in a Holistic Sexuality course. She only needs to turn her attention to the part of her body where the mucus will be felt and seen whenever she uses the toilet. In the evening she records her observations on a prepared chart which is provided by a trained teacher. Correlating one's hormonal changes with one's emotions, moods, and general responses to life assists in acquiring self-knowledge and to a deeper appreciation of one's powers. It also alerts the woman to the times of particular vulnerability to pressure for sexual intercourse, as well as to the messages which clothing or behavior may give to men whose sexual arousal is usually much shorter than women's.

The differences between men and women are not limited to the genitalia. The neuronal connections between the right and left cerebral cortical hemispheres are twice as numerous in the woman as in the man. While the implications of this are only now being researched, it is becoming clear that men tend to function either with the right or the left cortex ("brain"). Thus, they either think or feel while women, because of the richness of the intercortical communication (the wider corpus callosum) are able to invest any cognitive communication with emotional tone.

In other words, women tend to think and feel at the same time. The implications for this are virtually unlimited, not only to marital and romantic relationships, but to any professional relationship, whether in business or the academy. It's important to remember that the same message is likely to be "heard" differently by men and women. If one understands that, one is able to negotiate not only college life but all of life.

One good way to begin this negotiation is by not assuming that another person knows what one is thinking. As a rule, men are not gifted with intuition to the same extent that women are, hence are not good mind readers unless they have been taught by an intimate relationship, usually a marriage of considerable duration. Even if something is very obvious to the woman, it may not look that way to the man. It helps greatly if a woman tells a man what she would like him to do, either orally or in writing. Only then can she anticipate full and willing cooperation.

We return to the question often asked, and already raised once in this essay: What is the essential difference between using one's natural understanding of the periods of fertility and infertility to determine the timing of intercourse and using contraceptives? Contraceptives actively suppress the fertility of one or both of the partners, thus precluding accepting one another's body/person totally.

While one can argue at great length philosophically (and it has been done), I found the shatteringly simple statement of one of our clients said it best. She was a psychologist with a PhD, a practicing agnostic. She had tried every contraceptive before coming to natural family planning. At follow-up, she said "This method is so different. Now, I'm not holding anything back. Now, I can be all there." I've never heard the differences spelled out more clearly. When spouses love each other, they want to give all they are and have to one another. That means, that they can be vulnerable. But one needs to be able to trust before one can risk vulnerability. To be able to trust, one needs commitment, and a commitment which carries the support of one's family and community. We call it marriage. The sacramental commitment of marriage is greater yet. It undertakes to symbolize, to live out, the union of Christ and the Church. None of these aspects are attainable outside of marriage acts which are open to life

## Supplementary Readings

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For information about the Holistic Sexuality Program for more detailed instruction. Contact: Hanna Klaus, MD, Natural Family Planning Center of Washington, D.C. and Teen STAR Program; 8514 Bradmoor Drive, Bethesda, MD 20817-3810; Phone: 301-897-9323; Fax : 301571-5267; E-mail [hklaus@dgsys.com](mailto:hklaus@dgsys.com); Web Site: <http://www.teenstar-international.org>.

## Questions

If "body" and "soul" form the unity of the person, neither one nor the other being sufficient, what does this tell us about sexuality? What does it tell us about the integrity of the sexual act and about the body? What does it tell us about the place of sexuality in our human nature? Does it imply anything in terms of the Christian message?

In the fifth chapter of Ephesians St. Paul remarks: "For this reason, a man must leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two will become one body. This mystery has many implications; but I am saying it applies to Christ and his Church." It certainly applies to Christian marriage. How then does it apply to the union of Christ and his Church? What is the connection between marriage and Church?

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