

Intimacy

Stephen Howard

The word *intimate* comes to us from the Latin *intima*, signifying the deepest, most internal part of something. In medicine, the *intima* is the inner lining of the arteries, the *tunica interna* or inner coat. This joins with the endocardium, the inner lining of the heart. The intimate layer is the most profound and the most tender.

To be intimate is to uncover one's insides, to present oneself from the exposed and unprotected gut. In the act of intimacy we reveal our hearts and our viscera. We do this with great anxiety and trembling, for the movement of opening to another on an intimate level renders us exquisitely vulnerable.

The Japanese say a man has three hearts. The first he keeps in his mouth for all to see. The second lies deep in his breast where only his closest friends may go. The location of his third heart no one knows, for he alone may see it. Intimacy is the revelation of the third heart, the act of being fully present with the other while being fully oneself.

It is easy to be yourself when you are alone, for there is no threat. To be oneself with another soul means to be unsafe. We face the possibility of rejection, pain, humiliation or even destruction. Intimacy is a risk, and most of us have not had enough safety in our relationships to risk easily.

When you are intimate you are utterly naked. Not nude, meaning unclothed, but naked, unprotected, exposed and defenseless. Nudity has to do only with modesty, while nakedness can be terrifying.

Sustained intimacy must be built on the groundwork of trust. If you are unguarded with someone you mistrust, you are playing the fool. That is an invitation to be exploited or injured. It is not a loving act, for it lacks the element of self-love.

Intimacy can be risked only when the other deserves your trust, when he gives you reason to feel that he sees you as a *person*, that he values your being, has your best interest in mind and wishes you well. This does not mean that he will never hurt you, for he will be getting on with his life in a close space with you. Accidents will happen in a confined space: you will step on his foot and he will elbow you in the ribs.

He will hurt you unknowingly or unintentionally, and he will sometimes disappoint you. But he will wish you well, he will care for you, he will not use or manipulate you like a line of

merchandise.

We also use the word *intimate* in an erotic sense: to be intimate with someone is to be sexual with that person. But in fact, sex is more often about lust than intimacy. Sexual communion and personal intimacy can be joined, but they are not the same. Genuine sexual intimacy occurs only in a relationship that is *personally* intimate.

Closeness is not the same as intimacy. *Close* represents the same word as *closet*, a confined space. I may be close with someone without disclosing myself in an intimate way. I meet couples who are close and secure together and who come to see me because they lack a sense of vitality, excitement or playfulness. They sense something missing and they feel a little cheated. These people are ready to go to work on issues of exposure, risk and trust. They are yearning, emotionally, to get naked with each other.

There is no loving from a distance, or from the outside. In order to love we must take the terrifying and transforming risk of opening, of inviting the other in, and of being willing to enter.

It is a movement of vast uncertainty. We must commit wholeheartedly, with no assurance that love will be returned or that we will experience any reward other than the gladness of loving itself. And there is additional cause for anxiety, for in making the decision to love, we can never know what will be asked of us.

Intimacy and Marriage

Intimacy is an essential part of loving. Nowhere is this truer than in marriage.

When we are intimate, we are engaged in the difficult, frightening, but joyful act of being individually whole while being authentically present with the other. In the marital relationship the attempt to create *fusion* presents a special barrier to intimacy.

"We do everything together," this couple tells us proudly. They see themselves as two parts in a common entity. This was once called "togetherness," and was praised in the popular press as a great virtue for families and couples. But it was a



Mir Kalan Khan, detail from Lovers in a Landscape, 1775

The catch is this: when people are distinct and individual, there will be conflict. It may be as trivial as liking different music or as profound as issues of trust. Accepting and tolerating conflict is fundamental to the intimate relationship.

In intimacy each partner stands upright in his/her abundant humanity, loving and revealing and appreciating, but singular. There are spaces in their closeness, room for individual as well as shared living. Without recognizing and celebrating our differences there may be closeness but not intimacy, mutuality but not autonomy, comfort but not joy.

In some wedding ceremonies we hear the statement, "These two shall be joined as one." While this has a certain symbolic value, signifying union, I wince when I hear it taken literally. It suggests that in committing to their marriage, these people are prepared to give up their singular identities, to somehow merge or fuse into a new unity that subsumes both.

The Navajo have a wonderful ritual. During the wedding ceremony the couple is handed a clay jug containing spring water. The jug has two spouts to drink from, and the bride and groom drink separately. Each drinks the water that symbolizes the life they share. And each drinks from that source as an individual.

The intimate statement is not that I feel good when I am with you; there may be many reasons for that.

More importantly, it is not that I like the person I am when I am with you, for that implies that who I am depends on you. The genuinely intimate statement is this: when I am with you I feel safe to be the person I truly am. I can share with you the celebration of my being.

Intimate Sex

"Whatever we experience sexually reflects part of our Buddha self because our Buddha nature embraces all experience. We are Buddha kissing with all our heart, Buddha pleasuring a partner with complete joy, Buddha going numb, Buddha feeling afraid, Buddha enjoying orgasm, and Buddha feeling union. It's all experience, and it all carries the potential for awakening."

-- Charlotte Kasl

If God invented anything better than sex, he kept it for himself.

Sex outside a loving relationship can be very good. But with all the satisfactions it offers, it is not intimate. Intimate sex occurs only in a relationship that includes openness, trust and a sense of commitment – in other words, in a conjugal relationship. Only conjugal sex can be truly intimate.

dangerous idea, for it signaled a kind of collectivism in which individual identity was sacrificed.

For the couple who "fall in love," the sense of fusion – of melting together – is part of the rapture of romance. This illusory blending of souls is longed for as bliss, a state in which all is ecstatically well forever.

I ask people who seem trapped in this condition, "Can you be in a good mood if she is in a bad one, or if she is unhappy?" And I hear, "Of course not. I love her, so how could I feel good if she is not happy?" While this may occur in a loving relationship, this peculiar condition is not part of love. It is a manifestation of symbiosis, the notion that you have no real existence independent of your partner.

Symbiosis is the biological term for this lack of individual wholeness. It occurs when two organisms are dependent on each other for survival. Neither can function alone. Symbiosis allows only partial personhood. In a symbiotic relationship each partner perceives the other as being in some way part of him/herself. There can be no intimacy, for intimacy requires the acceptance of uniqueness and separation.

What about romance, you ask? Let us be clear about romantic love and conjugal love. Romantic love is about passion, desire and longing. It is born of the wish for redemption and perfection, and is consequently a powerful and enchanting reverie. It is an experience not to be missed.

When romantic love outgrows its illusions, as it inevitably must, it can metamorphose into something very different. I use the term “conjugal” to describe this more enduring love. The word traces to the Latin *conjungere*, meaning “to join” or “to unite.” Conjugal love involves joining and uniting. It is about our resolution to embrace and honor each other’s being, and about a covenant of caring and transcending. A conjugal relationship is a deeply intimate one that includes elements of passion, friendship, eros and the sacred.

The difference between romantic and conjugal sex – both of which can be awesome – is the difference between the romantic and the conjugal in other respects. The relationship becomes conjugal as the two people come to accept and love each other as authentic and separate individuals, without fantasy, illusion or symbiosis.

No sex is more rapturous than romantic sex. But sexual intimacy, like all intimacy, requires trust, trust that the partner will be non-judgmental, accepting, caring and tender. This can happen only over time and through repeated decisions and risks. It reflects who we are as individuals and as couples.

Intimate sex has a sacred quality even while it is lusty, playful and smutty. The sanctity is as much a part of the act as the physical pleasure or the wet spot. In a conjugal relationship there exists the possibility of merging the intimate and the sensual. As Nietzsche expressed it, “The spiritualization of sensuality is one of the great accomplishments of love.” This transmutation is something very special that, I think, does not occur anywhere else in life.

Sex and Spirit

There is a peculiar notion in our culture that sex and spirit are somehow opposed to one another. Yet without wholeness we cannot speak of spirit, and without our sexuality we cannot speak of wholeness. Even those who choose celibacy for religious reasons, or for healing purposes, are not denying the power and centrality of erotic desire; rather, they seek continence as a spiritual instrument.

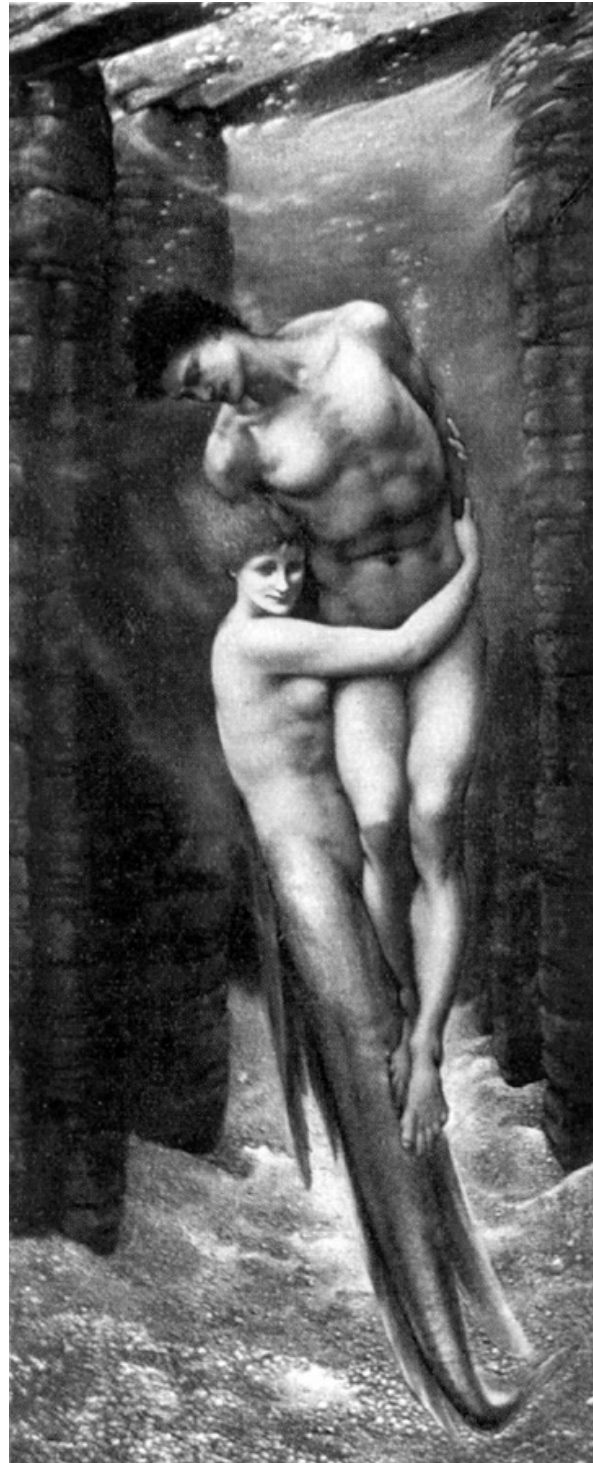
Sex at its very best is an act of intimacy. Intimate sex denotes meeting, creating, revealing, sharing, welcoming and cherishing. It both expresses and creates a loving connection, an experience of the openly offered heart. To be sexually intimate is to present one’s soul, exposed and unprotected, and to honor the soul of the other. In the act of intimacy we become profoundly naked; we reveal our hearts as well as our bodies.

Intimacy allows no gender roles or stereotyping. The gods come in both genders. In sexual intimacy we celebrate male

and female as aspects of the divine, glorying in our similarities and our differences, without predetermined roles and expectations.

The intimate sexual act is truly *lovemaking*. What could be more spiritual than generating love?

The Hindu word *kama* expresses erotic desire (as in *Kama Sutra*), and also the longing to be united with God. The spiritual meaning of sex includes joy, ecstasy, the deepening of love and the sacred connection of two individual beings ■



Sir Edward Burne-Jones, *The Depths of the Sea*, 1887