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1

IN THE SHADOW OF MORTAL SIN

It's so much better to desire than to have. The moment of desire is the most extraordinary moment. The moment of desire, when you know something is going to happen, that's the most exalting.

Anouk Aimée

Sex is hardly ever just about sex.

Shirley MacLaine

I know nothing about sex because I was always married.

Zsa Zsa Gabor

Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in this world? Which of us has his desire? or, having it, is satisfied?

William Makepeace Thackeray

There is a well-known Zen story of two traveling monks who were trying to cross a river. When they were almost across, a young woman called out to them from the bank they had just left. She said she was afraid to get into the water because of the current. "Could one of you take me to the other side?" she asked. One of the monks hesitated, but the other returned, quickly placed her on his shoulders, took her across the river, and put her down on the other side. She thanked him and went on her way.

As the monks continued their journey, one of them was troubled. Finally, unable to keep quiet, he broke out, "Brother, our Zen master has taught us to avoid any contact with women, but you picked that one up on your shoulders and carried her!"

"Brother," the second monk replied, "I set her down on the other side: it's *you* who is still carrying her."

At the core of this story is the question of desire. What's desire? Why do we desire? Why do we desire what we do? What are the consequences of desire? And how do we cope with desire? Simple

questions to ask, but answering them is another matter altogether. Desire is like quicksand; it's everywhere but hard to get a purchase on it.

Turning to the American Heritage Dictionary in search of a definition, we find that desire means a request, a longing, or being the object of longing, a sexual appetite, or passion. The dictionary also tells us that desire is a craving for something that brings satisfaction or enjoyment, or an intense wish—generally repeated or enduring—for something that is beyond our reach but may be attainable at some future date. Thus desire also has a component of fantasy. We imagine having what we desire. Sometimes our fantasies about what we desire go so far that they replace reality.

But why don't we take a test to see if we can pin down what we mean by desire? What about your own desires (as in sexual desire)? If you're asked to describe your wildest sexual desire, what would it be? Can you describe it clearly, or do you find it hard to envision what it is like? Does thinking about scripting your desire make you feel uncomfortable? Do you find the desire itself elusive? Are you trying to desire something you can't imagine?

This little exercise makes us realize how difficult—if not uncomfortable—it is to articulate our desires. The exercise poses another paradox: once we have obtained what we desire, we may no longer desire it; the desired object becomes less attractive. The unreal is more powerful than the real, because nothing is as perfect in fact as it's in our imagination. Only intangible ideas, concepts, beliefs, and fantasies linger on. This explains why down the ages so many people have maintained that it's better to desire than to have. Is it possible that the unique moment in time when we're closest to realizing our desire will actually be the most "exalting," as Anouk Aimée (quoted at the start) maintains? Is this what the poet James Russell Long means when he says, "The thing we long for, that we are. For one transcendent moment?"

One of the greatest ironies about desire is that when we obtain what we desire, our sense of satisfaction is ephemeral. It seems that fantasizing about desire—incomplete though that is—is more attractive than reality. It may be preferable to stay at fantasy level. At least we have a measure of control over what happens in our own fantasy. Perhaps our best love affairs are the ones we've never had. In comparison, reality can be a bit of a cold shower—not at all what we thought it would be. Recognizing potential disappointment may encourage us to remain in our fantasized state.

Whatever frustrations come our way when dealing with desire, it is an ever-present force that keeps our lives in motion. It's like

oxygen: we are not always aware of its presence, we may take it for granted, but it's always there. However we experience desire, the pleasure seems to lie in the act of desiring itself, the passing moment. As Robert Louis Stephenson observed, "It is better to travel hopefully than to arrive." The playwright George Bernard Shaw was of a similar opinion. He noted, "There are two tragedies in life. One is not to get your heart's desire. The other is to get it."

Desire is the essence of humankind. To be alive means to be able to desire. It's an emotional, not a rational force, and hard to control—it has a life of its own. We can't decide *when* we're going to desire and we don't choose desire; desire chooses us. As a well-known practitioner of sexual desire, Casanova, once said, trying to explain his love of bed-hopping: "*Hélas!* We love without guidance of reason, and reason isn't anymore involved after we have ceased to love."

Surprisingly, it's only in recent decades that we've had a better understanding of what desire is all about. Recent work by neuroscientists and developmental, cognitive, psychodynamic, and evolutionary psychologists has been instrumental in decoding some of the biological and developmental mechanisms that determine desire.

But here I have to add a caveat. Desire can be discussed from many different angles. In this chapter I'm going to concentrate on one of humankind's most important desires: sexual desire—the essential spark that ignites the human sexual apparatus. I argue that all human activity—including many management decisions—is prompted by this desire. In our very unpredictable world, there is going to be one constant, and that is sexual desire. It's our sexual motivational need system that links non-being to being. It is sexual desire that makes the world go round. Furthermore, although there is now an extensive literature on homoerotic sexual desire, in this chapter I deal with heterosexuality. Homoerotic desire deserves more than the sort of cursory treatment that I would have to give it if this book is not to be too long.

THE LEGACY OF ADAM AND EVE

To understand humankind's attitudes toward sexual desire, we need to look at how its origins have been explained. We might as well start with the story of Adam and Eve as told in Genesis, the first book of the Old Testament in the Bible. Is this a prototypical sexist tale, suggesting that if you make a woman out of a man, you are bound to get into trouble? Why were Adam and Eve evicted from the Garden of Eden? What was their transgression? Were they ejected because the

serpent tempted them to eat a forbidden fruit? Was it really all about an apple?

The “facts” of this well-known story are quite nonsensical, so there must be more to it than meets the eye. What does the apple really stand for? We don’t have to be rocket scientists to work this out. Given the nature of the punishment, the forbidden fruit must symbolize a pivotal human activity. One reasonable explanation of this story is that it is all about sexual desire. Adam and Eve’s fall from Paradise can be interpreted as a simple tale about two people who lust after each other but are not allowed to consummate their passion. No wonder they transgress. But there’s more to it than that. It’s also a cautionary tale, containing the warning that all sexual desire comes with a price. Loss of innocence—sexual exposure—accompanies expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

Ironically, in contrast to this harsh moral tale from Genesis, the ancient Greeks and Romans worshipped the pleasures of the flesh. They were anything but repressed in viewing the body as a vehicle for pursuing and indulging sexuality. The Greeks and the Romans had nothing of that guilt-ridden self-consciousness about sexuality that has characterized the Judeo-Christian tradition. The explicit erotic art and literature of the period is a real giveaway. It was a period in history when Western society had erected very few barriers against sexual desire. And Western culture wasn’t alone in its liberal attitude toward sexual desire. The same is true about many other cultures, as the Hindu erotic sculptures at the Khajuraho temple, and Chinese and Japanese erotic art and literature demonstrate.

But in Western society this era of sexual freedom did not last. After the relatively free and easy period of classical antiquity, dark days fell on Europe when Christianity became the dominant religious and social force. Christianity conveyed an antihedonistic message, equating sexual desire with sin. For many centuries, the Zeitgeist was dominated by the notion that sexual desire was responsible for dragging people into hell. The *leitmotiv* of the church fathers—quoting the gospel of St. Luke—was that “we are all sinners living in a vale of tears.” Humankind’s preoccupation with the pleasures of the flesh was superseded by concerns for the afterlife. As we will see, it was only after the end of the nineteenth century that sexuality resumed a prominent, more explicit, less guilt-ridden role in the social landscape.

During the Middle Ages sexual desire was seen as evidence of sin. The temptations of the flesh were something to be avoided. Guided by the story of Adam and Eve’s fall, the early church fathers viewed human beings as weak and susceptible to sexual temptation. Moreover,

they considered all sins to be addictive, and the terminal point of this addiction would be eternal damnation. Women in particular were symbols of extreme temptation. The church fathers believed that given a choice between pain and pleasure, women would choose the hedonistic road, leading to hell. After all, according to their reasoning, it was Eve who seduced Adam. Her sexual charms distracted him from rational thought, with disastrous consequences.

From a clinical point of view, the church fathers' emphasis on the seductive powers of women symbolizes an archaic, masculine fear of women in general, and the female sexual organ in particular. Deep down, the vagina becomes a symbolic representation of the ambivalence men have about the intrusive and withholding mother, the great mother of mythology—the mother who can protect but also can destroy, the woman as Medusa.

Not only were women dangerous creatures, but men would also have confusing associations about the major differentiator, the vagina, the focus of many masculine fantasies (a process that starts with comparisons made during children's play). This explains why stories of devouring, castrating women are so ubiquitous in mythology and folk tales. Reflecting on the content of these stories, it appears—at least to the male mind—that looking at, touching, or entering the female orifice is fraught with hidden fears. In the male unconscious, sex can become equated with dying, every orgasm turning into a "little death." Thus to the male imagination, the mysterious hidden womb becomes a symbol not only of fertility but also of blood and danger. The vagina becomes an organ of wonder and intimidation, a special part of the body that attracts and repels—many female rites and rituals among primitive tribes support this. No wonder that for the Christian ascetics, the mouth of Hell and the vagina evoked similar symbolism. It was a source of great anxiety. Sexual desire became fraught with apprehension.

An obvious strategy to control the expression of sexuality was to denigrate our sensual nature. Sex was dark, dangerous, and filthy. Women's genitals were not only gateways to sexual pleasure but potentially the executioners of men. To enter the vagina would imply establishing contact with an incomprehensible, pleasurable but also dreaded reality. It explains the enduring myth, present in numerous cultures, of the *vagina dentata*, the vagina with teeth. This myth symbolizes primitive masculine fears about castration anxiety, whereby the man—during sexual union—would not only be concerned about being weak or impotent, but would also fear the loss of the penis. And men not only have to deal with castration anxiety: added to this imagery of fear of annihilation by incorporation are unconscious

fantasies of “returning to the womb.” Men often fear dependency upon women, as if tenderness and closeness would once again render them helpless infants under the domination of their mothers. This “symbiosis anxiety” causes some men to separate love from sexuality and to view intimacy as a trap.

Obviously, the early church fathers were no psychoanalysts or psychiatrists. Depth interpretations—the understanding of symbolic language—were not their forte. Intuitively, however, they were astute in recognizing this lingering male fear of the *vagina dentata*. Pointing out Eve as the culprit, they reasoned that it was man’s great error to let his sexual urges escape the power of his will. To them, the tale of Adam and Eve was an illustration of the disastrous consequences of allowing the genitals to respond to fleshly desires rather than intellectual control. This admonitory tale—which they took quite literally—persuaded them to handle sexual desire with great caution. Given the weakness of the flesh—the body was viewed as a prison of the mind and soul—a superhuman effort was required to deflect people’s attention from sensuality. It was their duty to remind their flock that there was a better life to be found in the hereafter, not in the present. Paradise was the great alternative. Humankind’s hedonistic tendencies were unacceptable. It was their duty to make clear to believers that sexual desire brought only misery, just as it had brought Adam’s fall from grace.

Of course, we may wonder whether the church fathers ever thought about what a world absolutely free from what they considered sin would look like. Wouldn’t it have created a terrifying vacuum? What would they have to talk about? If everyone led holy lives, there would be very little for churchmen to do. Certainly it would diminish their role in playing Cassandra. Without sin, the church wouldn’t have much work!

SEX WITHOUT THE FUN

St. Augustine of Hippo, the fourth-century North African bishop and scholar, was more of a rationalist and argued that sexual desire might be acceptable, but within strict limits. It wasn’t easy for him to come to this conclusion, as he himself had to deal with his lust for his mistress and his devotion to his son. In his *Confessions*, a classic book on Christian mysticism describing his conversion to Christianity, he wrote how he prayed regularly to God, saying, “Give me chastity and continence, but do not give it yet.” Eventually, however, he succeeded in reaching this enlightened state, at which point he declared that

the sole purpose of the unholy activity of sex was procreation. St. Augustine advised that when a man and a woman were ready to have a child, the man, by exerting his will over his body, should summon a functional but lustless erection in order to have sex. St. Augustine regretted the necessity of the act, however, and made it clear that the participants should not enjoy themselves. A married couple needed to “descend with a certain sadness” to participate in sexual intercourse. Augustine presented the use of the genitalia for any other purpose than procreation as unnatural, describing sex for pleasure as an intrinsically evil act. Of course, the preferred state of humankind was chastity.

St. Augustine was enough of a realist (having fathered a child of his own) to realize that the male body could mock the will in the form of spontaneous erections, wet dreams, impotence, premature ejaculations, or other forms of loss of control during orgasm. Unfortunately, he was not enough of a realist to realize that of all the sexual aberrations, chastity may be the strangest.

We laugh at St. Augustine’s admonitions nowadays, but we have to look at sexuality in its social context. Not only did people have to contend with the damning words of the church fathers, there were also a number of other factors that needed to be taken into consideration about sex. In the first place, for many people (with the possible exception of the libertine aristocracy and the erotic underworld represented by people such as Casanova) family life was characterized by real lack of privacy. With whole families sharing rooms and beds, the probability of there being onlookers during sexual intercourse would not contribute much to erotic self-fulfillment. In addition, one of the factors that influenced sexual practices for many centuries (in contrast to social habits during the Greek and Roman period) was the fact that people didn’t wash. They generally believed that contact with water was dangerous, and would give them a cold or open their pores, making them vulnerable to infection. Most people stank. Sexual desire was also seriously compromised by the scabies, lice, and flies that plagued everyone, causing chronic itching. And if that wasn’t sufficiently off-putting, sex was accompanied by the very real fear of the high death rate associated with pregnancy. We have to remember that, in those days, between 10 and 15 percent of women died in childbirth. Like the awareness of AIDS today, this prospect cast a dark shadow over every act of sexual intercourse.

St. Augustine set the tone of attitudes toward sexual desire for many centuries to come. His long shadow fell over many of his scholarly successors. Influenced by him, the church fathers kept preaching that original sin, starting with Adam and Eve, was passed on from

parent to child, generation after generation, through the sexual act. Their message was that in Adam's fall, we all sinned. The prevailing literature, following St. Augustine's writings, was full of illustrations of people who wrestled with sexual desire and lost. Saints were presented as edifying examples of people who triumphed over lust, the intemperate craving for the pleasures of the flesh.

For example, Pope Gregory the Great, who ruled in the sixth century, listed lust as one of the seven deadly sins. Echoing Augustine, Gregory stated that "Legitimate carnal union ought to take place for the sake of creating children, not for satisfying vices." Lust was viewed as a deadly sin as it made people look at others as means to an end for the selfish pursuit of their own pleasures. It derailed their minds from God. The selfish pursuit of lust—ignoring the real duties humankind had on earth—would prevent entry into Paradise. Like his predecessors, Gregory worried that lust would get out of hand; he found it helpful to introduce this classification of sins as a way to educate and protect the disciples of the church from this uncontrollable, basic human pursuit. His list of the seven deadly sins and their punishments became a useful set of cautions to ensure that people's lives were governed by rules derived from divine authority. These seven sins were termed "deadly" because people believed that they could do terrible damage to the soul. Generation after generation was indoctrinated into the church's negative attitude toward sex, a continuing process that may have contributed to humankind's ambivalence about sexual desire as well as to sexual disorders.

Seven hundred years after Pope Gregory's classifying scheme (the ghost of St. Augustine still in pride of place), Dante Alighieri elaborated on this notion of sin in his masterpiece *The Divine Comedy*. In one of his three epic poems, *Purgatorio*, Dante also ranked each of the seven sins, placing the higher levels closer to Paradise and the lower levels closer to Hell. In the case of lust, he explored the relationship between the constructive force of attraction toward the beauty of a whole person and the destructive force of intrusive sexual desire. In painting his view of sin, Dante was more nuanced, however, than the sterner church fathers. To him, there was a fine line between love and lust—the lustful in hell were the people who subordinated reason to misguided desire. In this category he put lechers, adulterers, and similar offenders who failed to control their most basic impulses.

It is clear from *The Divine Comedy* that Dante was not quite sure where to place lust. On the one hand, lust's location in Hell—farthest from Satan—marks it as the least serious of the sins; on the other hand, lust is the first sin in Dante's list, recalling the common association of sex with original sin, that is, with the expulsion of

IN THE SHADOW OF MORTAL SIN

Adam and Eve from the garden of Eden. Figuratively, however, Dante arrives at a creative solution to punish the lack of self-control of the lustful. These unfortunate souls are eternally battered by powerful winds, unable to control their direction. In Purgatory, the penitents who had been prone to lust have to walk through flames to purge themselves of their lustful or sexual thoughts.

This negative portrayal of desire continued after Dante. His epic poem is one more reminder, however, of how highly regimented life was during the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance. At its epicenter was the unchallenged power of the Catholic Church, and the sanctity of marriage was central to its doctrine. Condemning desire as lust and the enjoyment of other physical pleasure as gluttony was part of Christianity's general effort to promote the afterlife over this life. The purpose of fasting and celibacy was to gain victory over the flesh. The pleasures of this world should be forgone, for the sake of pleasures in the next world.

Unfortunately, the church fathers viewed the sexual function in isolation from the psychological processes at work. They refused to acknowledge that human beings are more than the sum of their physical parts. What they didn't want to see was that desire can be an invigorating, life-affirming force, and, what's more, fun. Of course, the early church fathers weren't familiar with evolutionary, developmental, psychodynamic psychology or family systems theory. They were determined not to acknowledge the importance of human sexuality in humankind's biological makeup. They didn't see the link between sexuality, gender, personality, and human development. They also failed to make a distinction between sex and making love. And although the church fathers were willing to accept sex within marriage as a minor sin, that was the limit of their tolerance and as far as they were willing to go. To them, Eden's forbidden fruit was sin, which they equated with sex, thus maintaining Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden as a dreadful example of the consequences of indulging desire.

With their limited and negative attitude toward physiology, the church fathers stood no chance of considering that it might be better to work with our biology rather than against it. Quite the reverse: from their powerful position, they kept the upper hand, rejecting our physiological heritage. The church remained the major influence on people's attitude toward desire for many centuries to come, and religious theology was quoted authoritatively on the subject of sexuality. Eventually, however, early sex study pioneers such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, or Alfred Kinsey, and psychoanalysts such as Sigmund Freud, Theodor Reik, and Erich

Fromm, helped to change popular opinion of what sex was all about. These people suggested that there is more to sexuality than mere physical, genital activity. They recognized the psychological dynamics. Most importantly, they helped people see that sexuality should be viewed as a normal part of the human experience. In fact, Alfred Kinsey maintained, "The only unnatural sex act is that which you cannot perform." And to quote Sigmund Freud, "Analyze any human emotion, no matter how far it may be removed from the sphere of sex, and you are sure to discover somewhere the primal impulse, to which life owes its perpetuation."

It is difficult for us to realize now, but at that time (and many of these people, including Kinsey and Fromm, didn't publish until after World War II) it was an uphill struggle to change the cultural mindset about sexual desire. There was an enormous amount of resistance to these pioneers' ideas. But they persevered and stood up to the critics who labeled their contributions shameful and insisted their studies should be stopped. Notwithstanding their heroic efforts, the old religious persuasion persisted that God created the human torso, head, arms, and legs, while the devil added the genitals to the mix. The history of sexual desire has been a struggle between the way our genes have wired our brains, and the social behavior enforced by society. It's a story about the hurdles society puts up to prevent sexual desire being actualized.

GENE-DRIVEN SURVIVAL MACHINES?

Fortunately, in contemporary society sex is no longer regarded as a sacred act to be enjoyed only within the confines of marriage, for the purpose of procreation. From the middle of the nineteenth century onward, attitudes toward sexual desire underwent a major transformation and became much more liberal. The pendulum began to swing the other way and Pope Gregory's fearful list became increasingly irrelevant. The historical barriers—social, cultural, and medical—to the free expression of sexual desire were fading, encouraging increased experimentation with sexual desire.

This change in attitude was facilitated by the fact that people were moving from the countryside to the city in increasing numbers. They were no longer subjected to the stifling controls on their privacy that were part and parcel of village life. This population movement was accompanied by improved sanitary habits, better health care, and more convenient and reliable methods of contraception. In addition, both Protestant and Catholic churches had developed a

more tolerant attitude toward sex as also a form of pleasure. The ghost of St. Augustine was gradually exorcised. Sensuality was no longer viewed as an abomination before God, but as just another part of the human condition, inspired by God.

However, sexuality truly came into its own in the early 1960s, when birth control pills were legalized, which gave women greater control over their bodies. No longer hampered by the fear of pregnancy, women were much more able to act out their sexual desires. Additionally, with the progress of biotechnology, people no longer *needed* to have sex to assure species survival. Sex could be simply a social and cultural act. Now, in the twenty-first century, sex has almost nothing to do with biological necessity. In our world, hedonistic behavior is on the rise. We're living in a society more geared to the gratification of sexual desire than ever before. From Hugh Hefner's *Playboy Magazine*, founded in 1953, to TV's *Sex and the City*, sex is portrayed as an almost athletic event with record breakers, rules, judges, and spectators. The body has been turned into a sexual playground. Erogenous zones that have lain dormant for centuries are being rediscovered. Sex has moved away from the missionary position; total body sex, involving a variety of bodily functions, is now *de rigueur*.

The sex script between men and women has also changed. New scripts have been added in the form of sperm banks, telephone sex, sex clubs, and video dating services. Articles in magazines like *Cosmopolitan* or *Men's Fitness*, with titles such as "What Makes a Woman Beddable?" or "Hot, Fast Sex: The Quick and the Bed," reflect the Zeitgeist. The number and variety of sexual encounters that a typical Western man or woman has would rival Casanova. Love affairs look somewhat old-fashioned in an age of one-night-stands and orgies. But now sex has become much easier than it was in the past; has it also become less important? The price we pay for easy sex may be a corresponding loss of our capacity for deep love. The emotions associated with sex—such as affection, intimacy, concern, care, and love—play a lesser role in the desire equation, and we are left instead with a cynical society plagued by AIDS, high teen pregnancy rates, and extremely high divorce rates.

St. Augustine and Pope Gregory weren't evolutionary psychologists. Their knowledge of evolution was limited to the story of Adam and Eve. They saw lust as the desire for sexual pleasure run amok. They were not aware of the fact that the human sex drive, unlike our other drives, is quite unique. They didn't recognize that, for humans as for other animals, desire is all about the survival of the species. Human evolution determines much of our behavior, especially when

it has to do with our reproductive needs. Much of what we describe as sexual desire is hardwired in our brain. From an evolutionary point of view, sexual abstinence is very bad for species survival. The early church fathers picked a fight that they couldn't hope to win.

People today are stuck with the same sexual desires that drove our primitive ancestors. Evolution rewards life forms that survive, reproduce, and help their descendants get ahead. We're all the descendants of individuals who were driven and motivated to act on their sexual impulses, despite the church's threats about hellfire and damnation. As George Bernard Shaw said, "Why should we take advice on sex from the Pope? If he knows anything about it, he shouldn't!"

Our genetic imprint obliges us to be sexual survival machines, and so we do many things in the name of lust. Our impulse to reproduce has by necessity put a stamp on how we think, feel, and behave. Not only are we driven by what the zoologist Richard Dawkins calls the "selfish gene," most of the time we are not even aware of how our sexual desires work subliminally to influence our behavior. One thing is clear, however; throughout time, people who express their sexual desires most actively (in whatever ways they like) reproduce faster than the more controlled members of our species. Sexual adventurism has always been an intrinsic part of human nature and despite the dire warnings of the church fathers, this human tendency has never really been controlled by social mores.



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