

Intimacy

Entering the Innermost

BY CARRIE GROSSMAN

A few weeks ago while visiting a friend, I hopped on his laptop to show him something. While we were waiting for the page to load, on his desktop I noticed an article I had written about foreplay. “Hey, did you read that?” I asked with a smile. He shrunk back in his chair.

“That’s the piece most people download!” I laughed.

It wasn’t surprising. After all, who wouldn’t be intrigued (or appalled) by someone else’s views on foreplay? It’s not a subject that dominates most dinner conversations. Still, at home I scanned my website statistics to confirm and was shocked to see the foreplay article near the bottom. It had been knocked off the No. 1 slot months before by my essay titled “The Yoga of Loneliness.”

Loneliness over foreplay? It seemed rather curious. Wasn’t sex the one thing that attracted people’s attention without fail? Apparently not.

Although one woman’s web statistics are no doubt an unreliable source of data about the human condition, it got me thinking. Even in our sex-obsessed culture, there are subtler things that gnaw at us—say, loneliness. While sex can certainly be used as a Band-aid to cover up uncomfortable feelings, at the end of the day, no how-to manual, savvy technique, or “perfect” consort can distract us from ourselves. That’s because, at the basest level, sex is just two heaps of flesh coming together; what makes it meaningful is the embodied union between two hearts and minds.

While we certainly can’t leave the body out of a conversation about sex, without some thread between hearts, how long can two people copulate before their rendezvous resembles nothing more than a sweaty session on the Stairmaster? There’s a reason it’s called “making love,” and two bodies probably can’t make it without a little involvement from the soul. After all, the body is powered by consciousness, or whatever we wish to call the



mysterious force that animates our form. And when the consciousness of one being meets the consciousness of another—body, mind, and heart—there lies fertile ground for intimacy to blossom.

Intimacy—it’s a tricky subject to define. Often, when we spend time with an alluring “other,” our friends inquire, “Were you *intimate*?” But what does that mean? What constitutes intimacy? Is there a line we cross with each other that characterizes our relationships in this way? If we hold a stone in our hands and caress its smooth surface, or perhaps even kiss its grainy body, is that an intimate experience?

It’s a matter of perception, of course. And it may very well have something to do with how much we let our lover—or the world—penetrate us. Surely, entering each other in this rare and sacred way is not an everyday event. Indeed, finding someone suitable to sleep with is a bit more challenging than selecting a Scrabble partner, or at least should be. No matter how desperate we may be for connection, most of us still won’t jump into bed with the first person who sits next to us on public transit, and for good reason: Choosing a lover is serious business. After all, we are letting this

person *into* us, and not just physically.

If we really open to our beloved, we allow ourselves to be *seen*. It’s a question of openness. Do we want to expose our aching heart and express the depth of our passion? Or do we want to get lost in a libidinous frenzy, oblivious to the person sharing our bed? It’s perfectly possible to be physically “intimate” without letting our partner actually see us, even *with* the lights on. For heaven’s sake, sometimes it’s hard to sustain the gaze of a stranger, never mind a lover, for fear that he or she may actually glimpse our vulnerable core. We worry about being witnessed in this way, although—ironically—most of us long for the experience.

While we all crave connection, the thought of revealing our naked self to another can be terrifying. In the truest sense, intimacy is a kinky affair. When we really experience it, we allow our lover to see all of our kinks. We let him explore the map of our body—and thus, the map of our soul—with all of its secret caverns of light and dark. Our true face is exposed and our defenses penetrated with love, revealing something precious underneath.

It turns out that the word “penetrate” is related to the Latin *penitus*, meaning “inmost,”

which bears an uncanny resemblance to *intimus*, “the innermost.” Like a ripe plum whose fleshy sweetness beckons us to brave the sour peel, our “innermost” longs to be touched and tasted. In genuine intimacy, tenderness cuts us open, and out pours the nectar of our true self. We no longer feel the need to conceal our heart behind a hard shell. Love transforms us into succulent fruits, and our lover imbibes the juice of our disclosure like a fine, flowered wine.

Let’s not pretend, though: Intimacy is rarely so pretty or poetic. Once we are truly intimate with someone, very little remains hidden—our light and shadow are revealed. At times, we may feel so vulnerable that the only thing we want to do is contract, and it is precisely this polarity that defines the wild dance of connection: *openness, closure, openness, closure*. One moment we receive a kiss that reduces our mind to mush—openness. The next moment we misinterpret our partner’s glance and the daggers fly—closure.

Although openness may connect us with our innate aliveness and sensitivity, our kinked-up closure offers many gifts as well. In the safe presence of our lover, long-buried fear and grief can rise to the surface and be held. Intimacy creates space for us to explore our wounds and provides a field of love where we can deepen into self-acceptance.

At the same time, intimacy offers no guarantees, so *of course* we feel vulnerable. The word *vulnerable* comes from the Latin *vulnerare*, “to wound.” Thus, it’s not surprising that so many of us habitually remain guarded. Most of the time, we don’t want to be wide open, for few can hurt us like the one we reveal our heart to. There’s no solid ground in space, and quite frankly, it can be scary. We risk being rejected, deserted, and wounded by, as the poet Kahlil Gibran wrote, the “sword hidden among love’s pinions.” But while it’s true that love may very well wound us, it is precisely this wounding that cracks us open so more love can enter.

Ultimately, we can be intimate with others—nay, with life—only to the extent that we can be intimate with ourselves. To do so, we must put down our shields and summon the courage to face all that we are. By opening to the totality of our experience and embracing the broken wholeness of our humanity, we wake up to the fact that intimacy is not some “thing” that we get from another. Rather, it is a garden of openness where the wildflowers of love blossom effortlessly. May we all enter this sacred garden and be nourished. 🌱

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