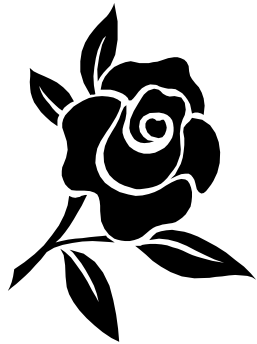


SEXUALITY

A Part of Wholeness



by
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FOREWORD

Elizabeth Watson originally presented the material contained in this pamphlet at a conference sponsored by the Family Relations Committee (now Care and Counsel for Meetings and Members) of Philadelphia Yearly Meeting on November 13, 1982. It was felt that it would be a service to Overseers and other members of Friends Meetings to make it available in printed form.

Care and Counsel for Meetings and Members, through its Friends Counseling Service, has counselors available to monthly meetings and to individuals and families. Care and Counsel also offers workshops and consultations to meetings, their committees, and their members and attenders on a variety of subjects.

Because this is simply a reprint of a pamphlet originally published in 1982, it may seem a bit dated in parts. There is no mention of HIV/AIDS, for example. The works cited in the foot-notes particularly display the age of the pamphlet.

For more information about Care and Counsel for Meetings and Members, the Friends Counseling Service, the *Pastoral Care Newsletter*, and other projects and services, please call 215-241-7068; write Care & Counsel, Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, 1515 Cherry St., Philadelphia, PA 19102; or e-mail steveg@pym.org.

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SEXUALITY: A PART OF WHOLENESS

I. The Individual

A. *What went wrong with the human race?*

Why is sexuality such a problem? In the beginning, so the Bible tells us, God created things: first light, then the earth, the sky, vegetation, fish, birds and animals. Each time, so it says, “God saw that it was good.” Finally God created people, in the divine image, male and female, and God blessed them and said, “Be fruitful and multiply. . .” (“In other words,” said God, “I’ve given you sexuality. Use it and enjoy it!”) And this time we read, “And God saw that it was very good.”

The other creatures who share the earth with us don’t seem to have our hang-ups. They just accept sexuality as part of life, perhaps the best part. What went wrong with us?

I began with the Bible because I wanted to point out its blessing on our sexuality. Much of what I will say from now on, however, will place the blame for some of our problems on the Bible, and on the Church, that is, the historical, orthodox Christian Church. The Church has shaped our thinking attitudes and taboos. It has perpetuated several myths that are based, I believe, on incorrect assumptions about reality, some of which come out of the Bible. We need to look at those myths and their underlying assumptions and see how they influenced our whole culture. It can help us change our ways of looking at ourselves and our sexuality.

Part of what went wrong is that we have assumed genitality is the whole of sexuality, rather than part of it. Further, we have taken sexuality out of the context of wholeness. For the past seven years I’ve been working on the concept of “growing into wholeness”. I have made speeches, led seminars, and written about it. I have had much feedback from other people which has enlarged my thinking.

What do I mean by “growing into wholeness”? It is working at being all we were meant to be. (Most of us only live partial lives.) It is seeking integrity, striving to be what William Penn called George Fox, “an original and no one’s copy”. It is not wearing a mask. It is acknowledging our strengths and gifts without false modesty, and accepting our weaknesses and limitations as part of us. It is springtime and winter. It is light, and it is also

darkness. It is being present where we are, seeing the personhood of others, saying “thou” to them. It is being at home in our bodies, aware of their needs, and it is being in touch with “that of God” in us. In short, to use Emily Dickinson's word, it is living life to the *circumference*.

1. **Dualism.** The Church, however, does not believe in whole-ness. It has insisted on a duality which does not accurately describe either the natural world or human nature. It insists on dividing things into opposites that are really halves of each other: body and soul, God and man, life and death, this world and the next, self and other: Christians and Jews, good and evil... It has seen things in terms of straight lines that divide (the sheep from the goats), rather than in terms of circles that encompass. It has laid out our lives in terms of “Thou shalt not!” rather than in terms of affirmation and seeking – what Jesus called “abundant life”. And it has enforced its view of the world through a hierarchy, insisting that the church has the sole authority and speaks with “infallibility.” How fortunate we are to be Friends! At the heart of Quakerism is George Fox's question: “What canst thou say?”

2. **Patriarchy.** The second myth is that patriarchy is the natural order of human relations. This is the social structure underlying the Bible. We might note that the Children of Israel were promised the land of Canaan by their God, Yahweh, who told them to wipe out the Canaanites because they worshipped false gods – fertility goddesses with names like Astarte and Asherah. Some scholars speculate that Judaism was originally a male fertility cult whose central rite was circumcision of the males.¹ Christine Downing, a Quaker theologian, in her 1978 Rachel Cadbury lecture “Religious Life and Feminine Experience”, pointed out the Old Testament passages which record the survival of goddess worship among the Hebrews from the time of Moses to the destruction of Solomon's temple.² Elise Boulding, another Friend, in her monumental “Underside of History”, thinks it likely that originally the Hebrew tribe was matriarchal like other nomadic groups in that time and place, and that Sarah, or “Sarai” as she was called then, was really the head of the tribe.³ Later writers presumably rewrote the story to make Abraham head of the tribe, the “patriarch”. In any case, patriarchy won out! We have a male God.

¹ Elizabeth Dodson Gray, *Patriarchy as a Conceptual Trap*. Wellesley: Roundtable Press, 1982; p. 25.

² Christine Dowling, “Religious Life and Feminine Experience,” lecture 1978. Copy available from Friends General Conference.

³ Elise Boulding, *The Underside of History: A View of Women through Time*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1976; p. 236, 273 fn. 9, and elsewhere.

Patriarchy says women are the possessions of men. This still permeates our culture, although wives are no longer bought like sheep and cattle. Women are held to be inferior to men, and obviously not entitled to equal rights. Why else could we not pass an Equal Rights Amendment to our Constitution?

Women are to blame for the evil in the world, because of the Biblical story of Eve and the apple. Women's bodies are a trap for men. Their bodily functions are unclean. There are special ceremonies to accept women back into the church after childbirth. Men, too, have been victims.

Because women were not to be near the altar, they could not sing in choirs. In order to have the full range of the human voice, boys with beautiful soprano voices were castrated to keep their voices from changing at puberty. In this manner they could continue to sing to the glory of God. Many churches still have boys' choirs to sing the soprano parts.

Patriarchy has resulted in two things: First, it has made the female body an object. Women are seen and are judged not as whole people, but on their physical attractiveness to men. The female body is a commodity, the stock in trade of the advertising profession. You see it draped over cars, holding out beer cans, and enticing men to “fly me” to Miami.

Terrible violence has been done to the female body – not just foot-binding in China and genital mutilation in Africa and the Middle East, but rape in college dormitories and in the streets of America. The emergence of shelters for battered women bears witness that violence against women occurs with alarming frequency, at all economic levels, and throughout our society. I will just mention pornography in passing. Girls are conditioned to try to make their bodies attractive from birth on, by their families, textbooks, advertising, popular songs, fashion designers (many of whom are men), and by the whole ambience of our society. They are to make their bodies beautiful so that they can get a man. Their bodies are painted, deodorized, rid of excess leg and underarm hair, made thin, and draped seductively. Intelligence must be played down, lest the prospective man feel threatened in what is presumed to be his domain. Once a man is caught, the woman is to take good care of his body and his ego, and further his career. She is to be an “enabler” rather than an achiever in her own right. When I worked after marriage, my mother remonstrated that this reflected on my husband's ability to support me. “How could I do that to him?”

It is no wonder women are confused about sexuality. Women are pushed to dress and act seductively, and then put down if they give in to the aroused men. Many of us are forever trying new diets so we can be thin and beautiful. But once thin and attracting male glances and wolf calls, we are not sure we can handle what may happen. Subconsciously, we feel safer a little heavier. So we binge, and the weight comes back. It is a no-win situation.⁴

The Church has given women an impossible role model: Mary, the mother who is also a virgin. Women are to come to marriage innocent. Men may come experienced. To enjoy sex is unladylike. Women are to be passive receivers and only have intercourse when the man initiates it.

Men, too, are confused about their sexuality. They are supposed to be tough, strong, courageous, and, yes, violent. How many bookish, unathletic, undersized, under-muscled boys in America are sent away to military school “to make men of them”? Take a look at the cigarette ads. The macho male image is as hollow as that of the seductive woman.

But turning the female body into an object is not the only thing patriarchy has done. Secondly, it has resulted in a pervasive view of reality that is only half true. Men's views of everything are thought to be normative for the entire human race. Masculine ways of thinking, making decisions, and coming to moral judgments are thought to be the only valid human way. Logical reasoning is the only real intelligence. Intuition, empathy, kinesthetic knowing are considered “female” logic – the butt of endless jokes. Men go in for abstract moral principles, and women's insistence on caring about what happens to people is “sentimental”. The military strategists say that certain people are expendable. Our government assures us our economy can tolerate ten per cent unemployment or higher.

Moreover, men's views of sexual functioning have been felt to be the whole truth. For generations men assumed women experience orgasm in the vagina, rather than in the clitoris. We now know that women have quite a different rhythm of arousal and release from men, and that their sexual needs and desires continue till later in life than is the case with most men.⁵

⁴ See Susie Orbach, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*. New York: Berkeley Publishing Corporation, 1979.

⁵ Mary S. Calderone, *Human Sexuality and the Quaker Conscience*. Philadelphia: Friends General Conference, 1973; p. 5.

Patriarchy has caused us to see the world with tunnel vision, with one eye shut. The experience and point of view of half the human race has been ignored. If we are to deal adequately with problems of sexuality (and likewise with poverty and oppression, the destruction of the environment, and the threat of nuclear war), we need 20/20 vision. We need the input of both halves of the human race.

3. *Sex is evil*. The third myth the Church has perpetuated is that sex is evil. Those closest to God (priests, nuns) are to be celibate. Paul wished all men were like him – uninterested in sex but since they obviously were not like him, he conceded that “it is better to marry than to burn.”

Sex is only to be for procreation, and only within marriage, from which there is no exit but death. If this seems an exaggeration, I quote from the *Boston Globe*, dateline Madrid, November 3, 1982, in which the Pope set it out clearly:

He attacked artificial birth control as “a falsification of the interior truth of conjugal love.” And he said of divorce, “According to God's plan, marriage is a community of love indissoluble and lasting for life.”

He does not ask those trapped in unhappy marriages, or mothers worn out with much child-bearing, or hungry children in homes of poverty, “what canst thou say” about birth control and family love. He may be celibate, but he is the authority on God's plan for family life.

Sex outside marriage is sin, whether pre-marital or extra-marital. Homosexuality is even more taboo. It is said to be “unnatural” although biologists tell us it is known throughout the animal world. What does “unnatural” mean? Both the Old and New Testaments are invoked on this, although that bears some scrutiny. A Jesuit priest, Father John McNeill, published a book in 1977 called *The Church and the Homosexual*⁶ which defuses the Sodom and Gomorrah story and, to some extent, Paul's utterances on the subject.

Insanity and other dire consequences have been predicted for those who masturbate. This is the one outlet for single people or those trapped in frustrating relationships. Yet probably every infant engages in it, and children early learn to do it secretively. Mothers are always alert to remove small hands from certain parts of little bodies. One shudders at mothers who

⁶ Father John McNeill, *The Church and the Homosexual*. Kansas City: Universal Press, 1976.

have told their small sons playing with their penises that if they do not stop, the offending organ will be cut off. Sexuality, says the church, is best dealt with by denying its existence and focusing on higher and more spiritual matters.

As a result of this view of reality, with its false dualism, its normative patriarchy, and its insistence that sex is “dirty”, history shows the pendulum swinging between periods when people generally acquiesced in this view and periods when they rebelled. So we have had Puritanism, and Victorianism, and the Moral Majority. When the pendulum swings the other way, sex is flaunted. We have sex for self-indulgence, exploitation, shock value, and we forever seek new ways of doing it. We have sadism and masochism. Virginity becomes a cause for ridicule, and the pressure to be active sexually is pushed to earlier and earlier ages. Teenage pregnancies are now epidemic in our society. Parents often push children into early dating, and very young girls are pushed into being models and into Junior Miss America contests.

Genitality is assumed to be all there is to sexuality. The mechanics of achieving orgasm is the subject of much discussion. Orgasm becomes the totality of the experience, rather than a byproduct of a union that is psychic and spiritual as well as physical. We even have the strange anomaly of right-wing Christianity blessing genitality in the Total Woman movement.

Why do young people seek sex so avidly and early? There is, of course, peer pressure and the fear of being thought naive. There is a longing to grow up quickly and escape parental authority. There is a desire for instant happiness when life is hollow. I found in the *Boston Globe*, again of November 1982, something that speaks to this. Rabbi Harold Schulweis of California, writing in a magazine for young people is quoted as saying:

The old morality proposed the idea of loving without sex; the new sexual morality encourages sexuality without love. Many turn to sexuality without love, not out of love, but out of fear ... fear of authentic relationships. A person who requires instant joy and instant contact reduces the possibilities for understanding another...

B. How it might be.

Let us imagine how things could be when sexuality is part of wholeness.

1. Love will be a relationship of equals. The emphasis will be on wholeness. Men will no longer have pressures to be macho but can be gentle men without being thought unmanly. Women will no longer be sex objects. They will dress for comfort as well as for attractiveness. They will find a comfortable weight and not worry about being thin. Heavy women will be seen to be beautiful too.

Advertising will become an honest recital of the qualities of a product. Friendships will be made across gender lines without always having sexual overtones. We will express our affection for people of both sexes freely. I believe we were given arms to encircle other human bodies. In short, the whole world will be like the Friends General Conference Gathering!

2. Sexuality will be a normal, beautiful part of life. Birth control has freed us of the double standard of morality for men and women. There will not be unwanted pregnancies. Sex is for procreation, when wanted, but it is also for love, enjoyment, playfulness, release of tension. The emphasis will no longer be on self-gratification, but on giving pleasure. People will approach love-making, each concerned to maximize the other's pleasure. Orgasms will come, but the orgasm will not be the end in itself.

3. Children can explore and enjoy their bodies. They will know from the beginning how girls differ from boys and can explore these differences in innocent childish play. They will grow up armed with knowledge of what is involved in intercourse and parenthood. They will be able to make more mature decisions when they are adolescents. Birth control information will be freely available.

However, until our whole society has achieved wholeness, we will also have to help our children learn to protect themselves from sexual exploitation. One out of ten children in our present society, it is estimated, will be sexually molested.

4. Sexuality will be seen as a continuum that includes homosexuality, bisexuality, and heterosexuality, and probably masturbation. Individuals will be at different places at different times in their lives. Those in one place will not pass judgement on those at other places. Gays and lesbians will live openly together, accepted for the whole, beautiful people they are, and free to express their love without ridicule or oppression.

I predict more lesbian couples as time goes on, for women outnumber men in our society. The 1980 census shows our population to be 226.5 million, of whom 116.5 million are women. That means there are 16.5 million more women than men in our country. While more boys are born than girls, the death rate for men is higher at all age levels. Medical science increases the human lifespan, but it appears to affect women more than men. Our retirement communities are largely made up of women. Widowed and divorced women have less and less chance of remarrying.

5. I think most people will probably still prefer to make long-term commitments, to be what Elise Boulding calls “stable pairs”, whether in legal marriages or in less formal relationships. And as we deal with problems related to sexuality, and become more whole, relationships will be more stable and long-lasting. I am mindful, however, that there have always been people who cannot live within this framework, and that they include some of the most gifted and creative and productive people, many of whom have given us great works of art and literature, and ideas that changed our thinking. I think, for example, of the Bloomsbury Group in London in the first quarter of this century, a group of writers and artists and intellectuals that included Virginia and Leonard Woolf, Lytton Strachey, D.H. and Frieda Lawrence, Katherine Mansfield, and the economist John Maynard Keynes, as well as others. There were among them complex relationships and passionate friendships that included sex, both homosexual and heterosexual. May Sarton writes:

Yet the strength of Bloomsbury may have been just this -- their fantastic honesty about personal life ... They achieved not only an amazing richness of production of works of art (in painting, poetry, the novel) ... and works of economics, but led extraordinary lives without becoming messy or self-indulgent ... How hard they worked, and what fun they had.⁷

6. In both long-term and less formal relationships, people will be honest with each other. There will not be affairs behind people's backs, nor deceptions that love still exists when it has ceased. If people have indeed grown into whole human beings and are leading fulfilling and rewarding lives, they will not be devastated by the ending of a relationship, though of course it will hurt. People will learn to be “kind and clear in binding and releasing.”⁸

⁷ May Sarton, *Journal of a Solitude*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1973; p. 76-77.

⁸ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, translated by M. D. Herter Norton. New York, 1934; p. 59.

7. Celibacy will be a viable option. Those who choose to be single will be seen as whole people and will be included in social affairs. They will not hesitate to go to restaurants and other public places alone. Their parents will not pressure them to get married nor their friends try to be matchmakers.

8. Women will be freed of the double standard. Their needs and wishes will become equally determinative with those of men in initiating sexual activity.

C. What can the individual do, given things as they are, and a dream of how they might be?

1. First, let each of us work at growing into wholeness. If our lives are interesting and rewarding, sex is more likely to assume its rightful place and not be an obsession. Let us build sufficient solitude into our relationships to nurture the growth into wholeness of all parties.⁹

2. Let us work at resisting exploitation. Women need to find ways of dealing with sexual harassment on the job, in the street, in business, in medical relationships, as well as in marriage. Women need to brainstorm ways of making men who exploit see them as human beings with dignity, not as sex objects. Men, too, need to resist exploitation. Women often use sex as bargaining power, withholding it or granting it arbitrarily.

At the Friends World Committee conference in Kenya I was part of a women's group which worked on a statement to be adopted by the Triennial Meeting. That statement begins:

In the spirit of love and truth we call upon Friends to take full responsibility for their own lives under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit. We recognize that *domination of others and submission to others* are both evil and preclude peace between individuals and nations. (Emphasis mine.)

3. Jesus said we were to love our neighbors *as ourselves*, implying that we begin with ourselves. We need to query ourselves. Do I feel good about my body and pay attention to its needs, not only for rest and food, but for sexual satisfaction?

⁹ Elizabeth Watson, “The Protection of Solitude,” *Friends Journal*, April 1, 1981; p. 3.

If my needs are unmet, is there something I can do about it? Am I really listening to what my body tells me its needs are, or am I pressured by external forces and values? If my appetite for food or for sex is compulsive, is it because of other unmet needs below the surface, perhaps frozen needs from childhood?

Do I like the person I am? Do I enjoy my work? Am I in touch with the seasons in my life, knowing that dry periods give way to times of growth and joy? Can I lift my sexuality up to God, holding it in the Light, seeking the answers to my problems?

4. Let us cultivate non-judgmental attitudes and learn to be unshockable. So long as people are not harming others, their life styles and sexual practices and preferences are not our business.

Let us refuse to gossip. And let us take a stand against oppression and denial of civil rights to any group.

5. With respect to our children, let our lives speak to them that sexuality is a part of wholeness. Let us create time and space for them to ask their honest questions, and never make them think their questions are naive, nor laugh at them, nor put them off until later.

6. Let us try to resolve conflicts creatively, seeking outside help or counseling when it is appropriate. We should weigh carefully the cost to everyone in breaking a relationship, especially when children are involved. But let us be honest and courageous in asking to be released from an unfulfilling relationship. Is it worth the toll it will take if we continue? Will we be bitter and poison the atmosphere for all around us? Children sometimes suffer more from a tense atmosphere than from a break in relationships.

By the same token, let us be willing to release a partner who needs a different space to grow. I think of the tragedy of Paula Becker's life. She was a gifted artist who married an artist of lesser gifts who found it difficult to accept the unequal talent. He continually put her down, and in time she left him and went to Paris. He followed her and persuaded her against her better judgment to return to him. She died in childbirth the same year. Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a long poem in memory of her, in which he says:

For this is guilt, if anything is guilt,
Not to augment the freedom of one we love
with all the freedom we can afford.
For when we love, we have no other choice
but to let each other go.¹⁰

7. Let us live as if the “commonwealth” of men and women were already in existence. Let us live our relationships as a “holy experiment”, remembering that holiness and wholeness come from the same root. Jesus said that the “kingdom of God” is within us, and already here. And Paul, the source of so much of our problems in this area, says this which is more helpful and to the point:

Be not conformed to this world, but be ye
transformed by the renewing of your minds.

Romans 12:2

8. Finally, let us strive to hallow our sexuality. Damaris Parker-Rhodes, an Englishwoman in residence at Pendle Hill in 1976, writes:

...there is for some of us beyond the sexual experience a further one, in which there comes a spiritual blessing of the body. While this is not in the least pious it is intensely holy, and when it happened to me I found myself murmuring, ‘I praise thee, Lord, with my breasts. I praise thee with my womb. I praise thee with my whole body and all my love...’ I had been in some suffering and was determined, if I could, to remain faithful to my marriage and to those I had such affection for. I had asked in prayer to be fed, but when this experience came it was quite unexpected. From the moment that this blessing came I knew that my hunger of body and spirit was appeased. I found that all my love had been renewed, both for my husband, children, and for my animals and the world outside.

...A spiritual blessing of the body brings a safety into loving. Obsession ends; and love is more deeply rooted in divine charity, by which the body is comfortable and fed.¹¹

Let us, then, strive for wholeness, fusing our scattered selves into a single self. Let us no longer rush about, pulled in different directions. Let our “yes” and “no” be said with assurance, out of the centeredness of our lives. Let mind and body no longer give conflicting signals, but bring their needs into the open and let us deal with them honestly. Let sexuality and

¹⁰ Rilke, *Requiem for a Friend*. 1908.

¹¹ Damaris Parker-Rhodes, “Truth: A Path and Not a Possession.” The 1977 Swarthmore Lecture. London: Friends Home Service Committee; p. 45-46.

spirituality walk hand in hand, blessing and enriching all that we do. And let us resolve never again to be combatants in “the battle of the sexes”.

So may we reach out to those we love, truly desiring their wholeness, as we desire our own. So may we bless all whom we meet simply by being at peace with ourselves. So may we work more effectively for peace and justice, and speak truth to power courageously. And let us live with joy and a light touch, despite the gloom of the world. Let us live in the Commonwealth of God, and thereby hasten its coming into the whole world.

Emily Dickinson said, “My business is circumference.” So is ours!

–Elizabeth Watson
North Easton, Mass.
October/November 1982

II. Sexuality and the Meeting Community

Several years ago the mayor of San Francisco and another public official, a man named Harvey Milk, were both shot and killed as they worked in their offices. Harvey Milk was a gentle person, openly gay. Holly Near wrote a beautiful song for his memorial service. Some of you have sung it at the Friends General Conference Gathering and other places. It begins:

“We are a gentle, loving people,
Singing, singing for our lives...”

And the next verse goes on,

“We are a gentle, angry people,
Singing, singing for our lives ...”

Friends have been known as a gentle, loving people, but for all the gentle face we present to the public, we are often angry on the inside. Sometimes when we are angry, we are violent.

Last summer at the General Conference Gathering I talked with Judy Brutz, an old friend of mine from Cleveland. She received her master's degree last May from Kent State. Judy had seen the findings of a National Study on Family Violence which were rather shocking in detailing what a

violent society we live in. For her thesis, Judy sent the same questionnaire to families in Lake Erie Yearly Meeting. One hundred thirty men and 158 women in the Yearly Meeting responded on violence in their families during the past year: spouse to spouse, parent to child, and sibling to sibling.

In general, there were no significant differences in the violence rates between Quaker respondents and the National Study. There was so-called “general” violence and also “severe” violence among Friends in all three family relationships. Quaker fathers reported significantly more acts of general violence toward their children than did fathers nationally. Quaker sibling violence, both general and severe, was significantly higher than sibling violence rates nationally. Variables of Quaker affiliation were examined, such as “length of association” and “commitment to the Society of Friends”. These had no mediating effect on severe spouse violence. Most of these people reported being opposed to war and many had participated in peace demonstrations. Perhaps Friends were more honest in answering the questionnaire than others, but even so the results are still sobering.

Do we have any reason to believe that Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, or New England Yearly Meeting or any other Yearly Meeting, would give different results? For all our reputation as a peace church, we are probably no better personally than people who think that our national security requires an arms buildup. Many of us are not a “gentle, loving people” nor yet a “gentle, angry people” but often a “violent, angry” people.

It reflects our lack of wholeness. We have emphasized so much and so long “that of God” in us, that we have denied there is “that of evil” in us also. We affirm the Inner Light, but not the inner darkness. Part of growing into wholeness is finding safe outlets for tension, frustration, anger, and aggression.

I cannot help but feel that sexual tensions and frustrations are part of the problem. How many of us deny that we have sexual needs? How many of us live lives of quiet desperation, trapped in frustrating and unfulfilling relationships? In how many marriages has any semblance of love ceased to exist? How many of us live alone, not from choice, with no affectional outlet? How many live with a mask on, because they dare not reveal their sexual preference?

Judy Brutz presented the results of her study to Lake Erie Yearly Meeting last summer. After their initial shock, they resolved to face the

problem squarely. What can a Meeting community do to help? Where do we draw the line between respecting privacy, and helping people face reality so that they begin to work on their problems?

We all need a place where we are accepted and cherished, allowed at times to be angry or petty or unreasonable. We need to know that we are loved, in our darkness no less than in our light. We need someone to hold our hands when things go wrong and we are beaten down, as well as to rejoice with us when things go our way.

Families have traditionally played this role, but increasingly the number of people not living in nuclear families outnumber those who do. This includes those who live alone, and single parents with no other adult with whom to talk and share responsibility. Some of us live in intentional communities which play the role of family, but for many Quakers it must be the Meeting for there is no other place to go.

I have known of Meetings that could play this role for the mentally ill – people who spoke too long and inappropriately in Meeting, who were easily hurt, who demanded unreasonable amounts of attention, sometimes people with severe problems. The Meeting would persist in putting them on committees, seeing that they had rides when needed and were not alone on holidays. Sometimes these same Meetings could not be as supportive of those with alternative lifestyles and sexual preferences.

Our Meetings are made up of fallible, often prejudiced, some-times ornery people, some of whom hold to their prejudices with righteous rigidity, feeling they are eternal moral principles. How can we transform this collection of stubborn, opinionated, lovable, diverse human beings into a beloved community that can give support and validation to all who turn to it? It is going to take some doing, but I think we are called to this task.

It is a place to begin to make a more peaceful world out of our thin-oriented, violence-prone, sex-obsessed, sick society.

At the risk of being obvious, I will offer a few suggestions.

1. Education: Meetings can be represented at conferences like this one on sexuality, and those who attend should report back. Meetings might organize their own conferences that might draw in more local people than can go to a conference at a distance. Meetings might invite speakers, hold

discussion groups, encourage support groups of women and of those with alternative lifestyles and/or sexual preferences.

There is need to educate Friends about various lifestyles. Often prejudice is based on ignorance, gossip, or sensational news stories. Prejudice dies slowly, and we must keep working at it. And we must continue to love and work with those who disagree with us, hoping that we may patiently and gently nudge them to a broader perspective.

Meetings need to build libraries of factual information. This should include literature for children, for teenagers, for those contemplating marriage, for parents, and for grandparents too, on sexuality, alternative sexual preferences, etc. Friends have good material on all these matters. The Library Committee of a Meeting must work at encouraging people to read what is available, through announcements, articles in Meeting newsletters, attractive displays, and other ingenious means.

2. There should be a core of people ready to serve on clearness committees for marriage – people well informed, at ease with their own sexuality, good role models of wholeness. Meetings might call attention to marriage enrichment weekends, helping people with scholarships and child care, if necessary.

3. Meetings might encourage support groups for both women and men. I think that in the beginning, at least, they should be separate, no matter how strongly some protest that Meeting activities should be open to all. Women have been doing this, sharing their stories, finding other women have the same doubts and problems and similar experiences, and they find there is strength in being together. Women talk more openly when men are not present. They rarely talk openly about their bodies and their sexuality when men are present in a group.

Men, too, might benefit from such support groups. This is a difficult time, especially for white, upper- and middle-class men, for much of the blame for racism is laid on them. Now women are challenging their values, their ways of doing things and thinking about things. They do things they have always done, but now they are perceived as sexist. Many men are hurting, because they have never thought of themselves as racists or sexists. Talking together can be reassuring, and help them deal with all that is being dumped on them.

4. The concept of clearness committees has been expanded to include other things than marriage and membership. Clearness committees can be used by anyone who is unclear in some important area. Those faced with personal problems or choices – vocational, parental, marital, whatever – may ask for a clearness committee. In many Meetings such people can approach the Clerk of Ministry and Counsel, designating people wanted on such a committee and being frank about those not wanted for this purpose. The Clerk should be prepared to set things up, on short notice if necessary. Only those who can be trusted to be scrupulous about confidentiality should be named. The committee should probably not be large. Its role, initially at least, should be supportive and non-judgmental listening, but committee members should have the wisdom and maturity to ask questions without being threatening, so that issues and alternatives are clarified.

George and I asked for such a committee when we were deciding to leave Chicago for Friends World College, and it was most helpful. I have served on several such committees for couples having problems in marriage. We made it clear that we were “for” both of them, not taking sides, and that we would not be shocked at anything they might share. Sometimes we could help a couple find their way back into a viable relationship. Other times it was obvious that the marriage should be terminated. The clearness committee could give support to both parties, and help the Meeting not to take sides, so that parting could be done with the least hurt, especially to children when they were involved. I have known couples who were able to remain in the same Meeting, eventually able to work on committees together comfortably with mutual respect. They became good friends and felt a warmth and compassion not possible while struggling to live with the tensions of an unworkable marriage.

Ministry and Counsel should also be knowledgeable about community resources such as marriage counseling, divorce mediation, legal aid, birth control clinics, mental health and counseling resources, and other groups equipped to help with problems related to sexuality.

5. Meetings might reach out to the wider community to help set up or support community facilities, or perhaps encourage and support individual members to do so. Friends might want to help staff facilities for battered women, or train for counseling on unwanted pregnancies, or work on hotlines for those who abuse their children or those who contemplate suicide. Some may want to offer temporary homes for runaway teenagers, or foster homes for abused children.

Children are perhaps the most oppressed group in society, with the fewest rights and the least knowledge and strength to cope with abuse. They are often victims of violence, sexual abuse, rape and incest, and they are afraid to ask for help because they have been threatened, even with death, if they told. Condemning the offenders does not help, for the underlying causes need to be dealt with. Meanwhile children need to be removed from the situation. One wonders at the sickness of our society when such things can take place, and in which pornography involving children is big business. Is someone in your Meeting concerned who could provide a channel for the Meeting to help? The American Friends Service Committee offices are often working in areas of child abuse and battering of women, and can suggest ways a Meeting could help.

6. Meetings should insist, with gentleness and good humor, but with firmness, on language that reflects our belief in “that of God” in everyone. Official minutes and statements should be in inclusive language, and hymns should be altered when necessary. We are winning this one! Two weeks ago I was asked to bring the message in a semi-programmed Meeting in the mid-west. When the first hymn was announced, we were told to sing “everyone” instead of “every man”!

7. Some Meetings recognize the commitment of “stable pairs” who do not want a legal marriage, but would like the blessing of their Meeting family on their being together. Sometimes this involves a wedding, complete with clearness committee and certificate. Some couples draw up contracts of expectations and obligations. They do not see why the government need be involved in their relationship. Often they are tax refusers as well as marriage license refusers. Other couples just want the Meeting's acceptance of their relationship by its recognizing their right to room together at Meeting retreats and outings. I hope more Meetings can move toward being supportive and tender and fully accepting of these couples.

Some Meetings are ready to celebrate marriages of homosexual couples, but many Meetings are still struggling with accepting gay people as part of the Meeting community. I can only hope more and more Meetings will become places where gays and lesbians are fully part of the Meeting family. Being able to talk about it is the first step. It is a joy to know that gay Friends can be open in their relationships at the General Conference Gatherings, but many Yearly Meetings are still struggling with it. Again, education must go on and those who care must keep working at it and being supportive of gay Friends in their midst.

8. I want to urge Meetings to study the Bible, looking to remythologizing some of the old stories that are part of our hang-ups on sexuality. Let us read the stories together, reading between the lines, discovering the bias and cultural limitations of the narrator, speculating on what has been left out or what has been implied.

So we might liberate Eve and see in the story the adventurous, authority-questioning, risk-taking, knowledge-seeker who accepted responsibility for her life and wrestled with what's right and what's wrong. So we might liberate Mary from the unreal image as Queen of Heaven, Mother of God, and recover her human courage and doubts and stamina. So we might liberate Mary Magdalene from the false accusation of being a prostitute. So we might discover the large number of women in Paul's support group during his arduous travels, despite his decreeing that they could not speak in church.

So we might see that Jesus does not fit the patriarchal stereotype. He defied convention and conversed with prostitutes in public places. He had many women among his disciples, and it was they who were with him when he died. And it was to Mary Magdalene that he first appeared after the resurrection.

If your Meeting does not already know the two books called *Using Biblical Simulations* put out by Judson Press at Valley Forge, I urge you to look into this exciting way of getting inside Bible stories and opening up the issues. It's an activity for the whole Meeting. Junior and senior high people love them, but I've also known octogenarians who could really get into roles like the serpent in the Adam and Eve story.

9. Meetings should be aware of those to whom outlets for sexuality are denied. I am thinking of handicapped people, also of older people who live alone, both men and women. They are often lonely and deprived of physical affection. A warm hug from a loving person in the Meeting family can meet a real need. Being included in activities, listened to, and cherished can be healing and make life worth living. The Meeting can also provide for older people, and others who live alone, friendship with children. One Meeting I know matched up the children with adults in the Meeting and close friendships resulted that enriched both the younger and older members. I think of the preponderance of women who live to a ripe age, with dwindling opportunities for meaningful heterosexual relationships. Meetings need to be aware of their loneliness and need for affection.

I want to digress here to raise the question of how well our pattern of monogamous marriage meets the needs of our society. An increasing number of women are destined not to be married, because there are not enough men to go around.

George and I had an illuminating experience after the Friends World Committee Meetings at Kaimosi, and I want to share it with you, without drawing any conclusions. We were invited to a home in Nairobi for dinner and the evening with a family who are not Quakers. Theodora Ayot, the mother of the family, had taken her undergraduate work in this country at Hiram College and is now a Ph.D. candidate in sociology at the University of Nairobi. Her dissertation is on the social structure and religion of her own tribe, the Luo, prior to the coming of whites to Kenya.

As is true many places, there were more women than men in the tribe, and polygamy was the pattern. A man had his own thatched hut, and in a circle with it were the thatched huts of his wives. Each wife had her own hut and garden plot, and they were hers no matter what happened to her relation to the man. She and her children could live, with a roof over their heads, raising their own food. Kenya lies along the equator, so clothes were minimal and non-existent for children. Children took their names from their mothers and lived with them until marriage.

The women did not resent sharing a husband. It kept them from having to have sex every night. They shared the community work and child care and helped each other in childbirth or illness or emergencies. Often they asked the husband to marry someone they thought would be congenial in the group. Everyone in society had a place and a means of livelihood.

When the missionaries came, the women were told the children must wear clothes. When all were naked, no one had noticed and sexuality was taken for granted and was no problem. The missionaries also told them it must be one man, one woman. When the Luo read the white people's Bible, they were puzzled. Abraham, David, Solomon and other worthies all had more than one wife, so why this insistence on monogamy?

The British colonial government further compounded the problems. To meet the cost of their government, the British imposed a stiff tax on every hut. Many men could not pay the hut tax for all their wives, and so turned them out. The women had no place to go and drifted into the cities, where

they were ill equipped to support themselves and their children. Many resorted to prostitution as the only way they could see to provide for their children.

I am not ready to advocate polygamy for our society. I have had a happy monogamous marriage for 45 years and would not want to live otherwise. However, I think we need to recognize that the imbalance of the sexes in our society denies this to many who wish for it. This is a situation Meetings should be concerned about. Lonely people often need warm human contacts, and hugs and embraces from loving friends can often be healing and validating.

10. Finally, can our Meetings provide a safe place for our sexuality and our spirituality to come together? Could we worship with our bodies and our spirits? I think of David dancing before the Ark of the Covenant. Could we, like the Shakers, spontaneously dance in our worship together if the Spirit moved us? Might the whole Meeting from time to time dance together in a circle that includes the children and the very old, dancing out our love for each other and our oneness in the Spirit? Recognizing that genitality is necessarily reserved for privacy, can we offer each other our love in all its wholeness, with our bodies as well as our hearts? I think it could be healing for all of us.

Several years ago Nancy Beck, who is known to many of you, had an evening program of dance at New York Yearly Meeting. At the end of her dancing, she quoted Jesus' saying, "Lo, I am with you, always, even to the end of the world." She asked each of us to turn to the person behind us and say, "I am with you." So I turned to look into the eyes of someone I did not know, and might never have come to know. Simultaneously we reached for each other's hands and said, "I am with you!" We meet now from time to time, most recently at Slippery Rock last summer. There we saw each other across a room and made our way to each other and reaching out our hands we reaffirmed, "I am with you."

And when alone I lift my friends up to God, I include her, knowing that she likewise prays for me.

My friend is a member of 15th Street Meeting in New York City. With others in her Meeting she is engaged in a ministry to the homeless people who sleep on the street outside the Meetinghouse. She is saying with her life to these derelicts, "I am with you", as she goes out, unafraid, in the streets of

New York on Saturday nights to get these homeless people into shelters, following up by trying to get them referred to agencies which can help them function again.

People seek security and relationship in genital gratification, running from partner to partner, hungering and not being filled. What we really need is to know that someone is with us. As Damaris Parker-Rhodes said, when we have blessed our sexuality, obsession ends, and we can reach out to each other in our terrible isolation, saying with our bodies as well as our hearts, I am with you. To paraphrase Saint Theresa, "Christ has no body on earth but ours."

From the strength of a Meeting that is in truth a beloved community, we may be given in time the maturity to look into the faces of strangers – faces that may register depravity and lust – and not turn away in disgust and loathing, but with quiet dignity and spiritual presence affirm, for a fleeting moment, their personhood.

So we may come to walk cheerfully over the earth, answering that of God in everyone.

–Elizabeth Watson
North Easton, Mass.
November 1982