

**THE SPIRIT OF SEXUAL HEALTH:
BEYOND THE POLITICS OF “PERFORMANCE”**

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This paper describes a ten-year journey into sex research. It grew organically from questions women were asking in my clinical practice about the *unmeasurable* facts of sexual response—the sense that true eroticism involves far more than the body; that it resides in the links between physical sensation and spiritual energies such as love, compassion, altruism, empathy, and awe—that make physical excitement delicious, meaningful, and sometimes life-transforming.

I found that there had never been a national survey conducted on sexuality and spirituality. Fifty years of sex-survey research, beginning with the 1948 and 1953 *Kinsey Reports*, had established norms about sex that were almost exclusively performance-oriented—with intercourse and orgasm heading the list. All of these norms can be counted and measured, but none of them takes into account the issues that my clients said were so vital to their sexual pleasure and wellbeing: safety, communication, empathy, intimacy, and the spiritual connections inherent in sexual desire and satisfaction. I undertook to create a survey centered on these issues.

“Integrating Sexuality and Spirituality” (ISIS)

As an independent researcher I could ask any questions I chose without basing them on former sex surveys or constraints of institutional funders. I titled the survey “Integrating Sexuality and Spirituality.” The acronym “ISIS” appeared only recently, and the story of ISIS is so emblematic of this project that I want to introduce her here.

Isis is known as the Goddess of a Thousand Names, Initiator into the Sexual Mysteries. She wandered the corners of the earth gathering up parts of her dismembered husband, Osiris—but she was unable to find his penis. Undaunted, she created one out of clay, breathed Osiris back to life, and conceived his child. How appropriate to invoke her name in this survey—which gathered thousands of diverse respondents to help refashion phallogocentric notions of sexual function and breathe new life into the ancient idea that there are spiritual dimensions to sexual health.

Sampling methods

Printed ISIS surveys distributed by me or by colleagues accounted for almost one third of the respondents; publication of the survey in *New Age* and *New Woman* magazines accounted for the other two-thirds. It is important to state here that this kind of convenience sampling does not necessarily mean the survey results inaccurately reflect women’s attitudes, although it does limit the generalizability of the results. An examination of 20th century sex surveys shows that random sampling has often misrepresented women, portraying them as less interested, less experienced, less satisfied, and more dysfunctional than women have reported elsewhere, even in the clinical literature.

Demographics

The ISIS survey was completed by 3,810 respondents, which places it among the large U.S. scientific sex surveys. Eighty-two percent of these respondents are women, 18% men, and 1% transgendered. They are ages 18 to 86, and represent every state in the U.S. along with a wide range of racial, ethnic, economic, and religious backgrounds and sexual orientations.

Extraordinarily, 38 percent of the ISIS respondents—1,465 of them—wrote letters to accompany their survey responses, even though no narrative response was required. Both the statistics and letters constitute a unique body of contemporary lived experience, as they are the first to document the spiritual aspects of sexual experience and give them cogent language.

This paper presents an overview of six key ISIS findings on the spiritual dimensions of sexual health. Note that these findings apply to the 684 men who responded to the survey as well as to the 3,110 women and the 11 transgendered individuals. A major surprise of the data analysis is that the survey responses reflect many more gender convergences than differences.

1) Sexual response is multidimensional, not just physical

This finding suggests a many-layered spectrum of sexual experience beyond the physiological, performance-based definitions of arousal, intercourse, and orgasm. In the ISIS survey, 86% of the women, 85% of the men, and 72% of the transgendered respondents said: “Sex is physical but also involves love, romance, and mystical union.” Most respondents also affirmed that: “Sex needs a spiritual element to be satisfying:” 67% of the women, 53% of the men, and all of the transgendered respondents. ISIS respondents reported making connections between sex and spirit variously through their senses, emotions, imaginations, and memories, including “soul memories.”

Connections ranged from the purely physical (“our lust,” “my vibrator”) to flights into non-ordinary reality (the “unseen world” that includes near-death experiences, astral travel, past lives with partners, and “sleep orgasms with spirits”). Some wrote they experienced the connections quite spontaneously while they were making love, or while meditating or dreaming. Some wrote that they had actively sought them through drugs, or through body work, energy sessions, yoga, Tantra, or shamanic rituals that invoked the energies of both body and spirit. Some wrote that they discovered the connections by finding a love relationship that was “made in heaven,” and some through aligning themselves with the throbbing pulses in nature—trees, sunsets, giant stones in sacred places. Others discovered them in Internet chat rooms, or by practicing earth-based religions such as Wicca, that honor the erotic energy of all living things. Some encountered them through more everyday activities, such as reading, dancing, or listening to music.

Clearly, this finding is based on subjective data. Yet the multidimensionality of sexual response is now being confirmed by brain research, especially the 2001 studies by Beverly Whipple and Barry Komisaruk. F-MRIs performed in their Rutgers University laboratory show that sexual response is much more than physical. *Multiple* regions of the brain *simultaneously* responded to vaginal stimulation. These included regions that control hunger, emotional response, religious ecstasy, memory, and anticipation of

reward and punishment. (UCLA brain researchers are now measuring political responses to images of Kerry and Bush.)

This ISIS finding on multidimensionality also demonstrates that the language usually used to describe sexual experience expresses only a fraction of the whole picture. Respondents' letters introduce a range of emotion, meaning, complexity, and mystery. They vibrate with phrases, like "joyous play;" "alive and free;" "life force;" "creative and juicy;" "celebration of life;" "divine connection." Such phrases differ markedly from the usual language of sex—from the conquest language of pornography to the analytical terms of medicine. Even the word counts tell this story. The 1,465 letters contain over 4,400 phrases describing the spiritual, emotional, and relational aspects of sexual experience, and only 23 mentions of the genitals—whose functioning has been the major focus of every institutionally sanctioned survey on human sexual response.

Is this ISIS focus on feelings and meanings a mere anomaly or deviation from the norm? My opinion is that it expresses a truth that has been lurking beneath the surface of sex research for years. My purpose in making it explicit here is to urge sexuality professionals to broaden how we develop our survey questionnaires and take sex histories of our clients.

1) Erotic satisfaction is primarily experienced in relationship

For many ISIS women and men, relationship served as a kind of crucible in which sexuality and spirituality could interact, merge, and sometimes morph into a larger entity. Love and acceptance was reported as important to sexual satisfaction by 86% of the women, 81% of the men and 54% of the transgendered respondents. Oneness with a partner was reported as important to 86% of the women, 74% of the men and 72% of the transgendered respondents.

It is important to understand how these ISIS respondents conceptualized "relationship." Often, they used relationship in the conventional sense, to refer to a specific sexual partner—be that heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or "queer." But some described relationship as the intense connection to self—self-awareness, self-knowing, the ability to touch one's own body or emotions. Oneness with self is reported by 54% of the women, 58% of the men and 36% of the transgendered respondents.

Others described relationship as something beyond both partner and self. They spoke of relationship to an energetic principle, variously named God, Goddess, nature, creativity, a higher power, or some other term denoting universal energy.

Many respondents implied that sexual response was a kind of relationship in and of itself, in that it connected them with the realms of nature and spirit as well as of human beings. A 32-year-old artist from North Carolina described just such a relationship, attributing an element of sexuality and spirituality to every aspect of her life.

Some of my best "sex" has been creating beauty in the world in art, writing, and gardening—sharing gifts from Spirit. Sacred sex is spiritual and not just found in intercourse. It's all around, in everything we see, hear, smell, touch, taste.

Honey is sex. A fresh warm strawberry is sex. Living is a sacred sexual experience.

This second ISIS finding further expands the limits of sexual experience beyond performance definitions of sexual response. It adds a relational context to the notion of

sexual multidimensionality, supporting possibilities for an erotic consciousness that includes self, nature, and the divine, as well as a specific partner in a specific situation.

3) Sex and spirit become more closely connected as we age

The third ISIS finding challenges the pervasive stereotype that sex goes downhill at midlife and beyond. This finding suggests that if we broaden definitions of “sex” to include emotional and spiritual connection, our golden years may contain expanded options and increased satisfaction instead of gloom and dysfunction. For instance, older ISIS respondents reported more connections between sexuality and spirituality than younger respondents did, and they also employed a greater number of strategies such as eye-contact, meditation, and sharing deep feelings to incorporate spirituality into their sexual experiences. When asked if “sex always needs to have a spiritual element to be satisfying” 41% of respondents age 60 and older answered “Yes” while only 15% of respondents under age 30 answered “Yes” to the same question. Similarly, when asked “Have you ever experienced God in a moment of sexual ecstasy?” 58% of respondents age 60 and older answered “Yes,” while only 23% of respondents under age 30 answered “Yes” to the same question.

One couple stated their age as “74 years young” and their occupation as “sexually active.” (They are from New England and their lifestyle is polyamorous.) His letter eloquently describes the meeting of body and spirit, along with the appearance of God in a moment of sexual ecstasy:

...oneness in love is a prolonged time of at least 4 to 6 hours of foreplay, oral sex, (whatever pleases the other), culminating in spiritual orgasm simultaneously where for a sacred moment the bodies blend as one, and the face of creation is seen.

Older respondents also reported that spirituality brought a relational richness to sex that intensified with age, like fine wine. A 66-year-old Catholic retiree wrote of her 20-year relationship:

I believe that in some way our souls have connected in a manner that we are at a loss to explain. I know that when we make love, there is a spiritual joining that enhances the sex. I'm not the most beautiful woman ever and he is not the most handsome man in the world. But, I'm his woman and he's my man. Our love is solid and complete and our sex life is like no other.

Clearly, responses like these do not represent every senior citizen in America. But they do offer a glimpse of a positive sexual universe as we age. This universe runs parallel to the world of diminished performance defined by medicine and exploited by the pharmaceutical industry, who relentlessly promises a quick fix, whether we want it or not. But Viagra and hormone replacement cannot produce the kind of relational and spiritual magic evident in the ISIS responses quoted above. (The New View campaign has much more to say on the topic of pharmaceuticals and I highly recommend the book edited by Leonore Tiefer: *A New View of Women's Sexual Problems.*)

4) Organized religions convey paradoxical messages about both sex and spirit.

The fourth ISIS finding underscores the nuanced relationship between spirituality, religion and sexuality. It reveals reverence, hope, and fear, along with

doctrinaire do's and don'ts of marriage, affairs, sexual orientation, conception, abortion, self-control, body image, the merging of body and soul, and overall "goodness."

About a quarter of the men and women in the twenty-two faith traditions represented by ISIS respondents described the guilt, shame, and sexual paralysis instilled by religious messages. ("Man, Catholicism sure does screw up one's 'pleasure thoughts,'" wrote a 33-year-old Nevada homemaker in her survey response.)

Yet even more respondents described how their religious beliefs helped them express their sexuality more fully, ultimately fostering the ability for love, intimacy, empathy, and sexual oneness—74% of the women, 59% of the men, and 81% of the transgendered respondents said that these beliefs affirmed that "love is good in all its forms and expressions;" 59% of the women, 49% of the men, and 45% of transgendered respondents reported that their religious beliefs opened them to risk deeper intimacy.

Interestingly, some women said their sexual experience brought them closer to religious experience. A 39-year-old professor from Atlanta Georgia wrote this immortal line describing her first experience of oral sex:

I knew the minute my partner's tongue touched my clitoris that there is a God. Sexual pleasure and sexual love is, for me, evidence of God.

The overall message of this fourth ISIS finding is that the courage to question religious values may lead to an increased capacity for both sexual and spiritual connection, even when the values themselves are firmly carved in stone.

4) Abuse disconnects sexual response from spiritual response

The fifth ISIS finding confirms that sexual wounding has the potential to devastate both body and soul, diminishing the capacity for healthy relationships and healthy lives.

Childhood sexual abuse was reported by 24% of the women, 11% of the men, and 18% of the transgendered respondents. Sexual abuse in adulthood was reported by 17% of the women, 5% of the men, and 18% of the transgendered respondents. Respondents' letters described sexual wounding by parents, partners, and cultural messages. They chronicled the life dramas that resulted from repression and depression, abuse and substance abuse, sexism, poverty, homophobia, exploitation, and media stereotyping. Such dramas are typified by the story related by this 51-year-old Vancouver housewife.

When I was young, I lived in a house where no one kissed, hugged or touched. I never knew about sex, as it was "taboo." On my wedding day, my mother told me "It takes about 10-15 minutes. Just lie there and take whatever he does, after that you can take a shower." My uncle molested me when I was 13. My mother caught him in the act and banned him from the house. I was not allowed to talk about the experience.

My first husband taught me the pleasures of sex, and the first years of our marriage were beautiful. After he became addicted to drugs, however, he became abusive and our sexual life was a nightmare. Once he "sold" my "services" for a bag of H [heroin]. I was repeatedly sodomized and needed surgical repair. My second husband unfortunately became impotent for the last three years of our marriage before he died.

This is only one of the stories illustrating that not all sex is spiritual, or spiritual in a positive sense. This fifth ISIS finding calls for heightened awareness and

comprehensive sexuality education to help mitigate the pervasive personal and social dysfunction that can lead to trauma, despair, and separation of sex and spirit.

4) Connecting sexuality and spirituality promotes personal and cultural healing

ISIS respondents were at their most innovative and courageous when discussing the healing power of integrating sexuality and spirituality. They spoke of connections between sex and spirit that expanded their sense of self, love, creativity, well-being, altruism, and union with a “higher power.” For instance, the housewife quoted above went on to describe how connecting sex and spirit helped transform her life:

My third husband has been “heaven-sent.” It has been with him that I’ve discovered that spirituality and sex need not be separated and that the core of each of us is the essence of the universe—love. When we come together physically, it’s as if the Goddess and the God are there also....For the first time in my life I understand the concept: “The two become one flesh.” We also become one with the Great All, Love. Physical love is the deepest expression of the Creator we can experience on this plane of existence.

Some respondents reported that old negative experiences actually became paths to personal growth. For instance, a 34-year-old West Coast psychologist wrote:

While in treatment for “adults molested as children” I realized the “gift” of being molested...once I cleared the anger, shame, hatred. Forced me to love my body and soul for its life force, pleasure, creativity and power.

The overall message of this finding is optimistic: Integrating sexuality and spirituality is a powerful means of fully embracing ourselves and one another. ISIS responses also underscore the larger significance of focusing on the spiritual dimensions of sexual health. Broadened definitions of our sexual relationships form a broadened template for all kinds of relationships, including interactions with our communities, and with the planet. In the words of a research fellow from Maryland, connecting sex and spirit can become “an awesome tool for transcending the mundane and communicating with the source of all power and life.”

In conclusion, The ISIS survey presents a story of sexual health that is far more complex than other surveys have led us to believe. The findings broaden the discourse on sexual partnership beyond dysfunction and the Mars-Venus debate. They reflect the ability of women and men of all ages to make a wide range of sexual choices based on self-esteem, partnership, and what sex means to their lives.

All told, ISIS results convey an urgent message for clinicians, educators, and researchers today: As you seek to investigate what constitutes sexual health and wholeness, look beyond physical performance to include the emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions of sexual experience. Above all, listen closely to your clients, students, colleagues, and friends. You’ll hear about sexual responses that range from skin hunger to emotional and cosmic connection. You’ll hear religious beliefs that transcend guilt, shame, and “good-girls-don’t” messages. You’ll hear that it is possible to experience sexual safety and sacred union even after histories of disappointment and abuse. You’ll hear a multidimensional model of sexual relationship—with self, partner, and a “higher power” or divine energy. You’ll hear women—and men—speak of sexual response in terms that go beyond physical standards of sexual function: in phrases like: “an ocean of love,” “cosmic experiences of oneness,” “times in which the body/spirit

sings.” Listen. For their stories document the unmeasurable facts of sexual experience that have moved human beings across the ages to cultivate meaningful sexual relationships.

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