

Fifty Shades of Grace: The Crafting of Sexual Wisdom

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Each of us has lived sexual experience that gives us embodied knowledge. This embodied knowledge is a primary source for the creation of practical sexual wisdom. We learn by doing, bumping up against others and mining the consequences to create a personal ethic. Grace accompanies us along the way. In this article a model of sexual-spiritual integration is proposed in which embodied knowledge is in critical-liminal conversation with other sources of knowledge to create practical sexual wisdom in a poetic and phronetic process. Such integration is an example of the moral creativity of the human being and derives from the function of sexuality in the person, the story-telling tendency of the brain to create identity, and the narrative intelligibility of human life. Implications for theological education (providing safe space, information, and invitations to critical and liminal reflection) are briefly discussed before particular graces (desire, vulnerability, honesty and wrestling) are explored and illustrated by stories and poems.

KEYWORDS grace, integration, poesis, practical wisdom, sexuality, spirituality

The crafting of sexual wisdom

My thesis is that the crafting of sexual wisdom is a poetic and graced process. I begin with a poem:

Psalm 90 redux

I stand beneath a canopy of stars and marvel —
If all time were held in this graced movement,
If every story began in the swirl of dust and gas that shimmers,
Still You would be greater.

I kneel beside a hoed garden bed, head covered —
If all beauty coalesced in the soft petals of this rose,
If its scent captured the prayers of countless pilgrims,
Still You would be more beautiful.

I hold my lover in my arms, my breath a thanksgiving —
 If all human longing were satisfied in this,
 If all tenderness and all courage were born here,
 Still Your love would be larger.

Our lives are so small,
 yet their drama is writ large:
 a slender reed reaches
 into the earth for nourishment
 and up to the sky for warmth,
 vulnerable to drought and flood,
 so easily crushed,
 so elegantly bowed
 by the evening breeze.

We would be beautiful in Your sight,
 should You glance this way.
 Again from Your lips would we hear
It is very good, indeed.

Bless, O Lord, our immense fragility.
 Kiss our bowed heads
 and take our shaking hands in Yours.
 Lift our eyes towards Your beauty,
 and make us to stand
 as those who know their own.
 (Grosch-Miller 2014: 57)

The motivating question

From 2007 to 2013 I conducted qualitative research into the sexual and spiritual lives of a small group of ordinands, seeking insights into how integration happens so that I could improve my practice as a theological educator (Grosch-Miller 2013). The presenting problem that motivated the query was the prevalence and impact of ministerial sexual misconduct, which appears to occur significantly more frequently than in comparable caring professions (Friberg and Laaser 1998: vii; CTBI 2002: 83–84; McClintock 2004: 103, 106). Simply informing ordinands of the rules of Christian sexual ethics and exhorting them to abide by them does not create Christian ministers who appropriately keep their hands and other body parts to themselves and their covenanted partners. What are needed are educational practices that support the creation and internalization of a personal Christian sexual ethic. What is needed is a faithfully realistic understanding of the role of sexuality in human life that enables making sense of the relationship between sex and faith.

Whilst the research was motivated by concerns about transgression, my findings unveiled a more complex view of sexuality that majored more on grace than sin. I

discovered that sexuality and spirituality are interrelated, each influencing and expressing the human capacity for love. I observed that grace is operant through our sexual lives and experiences, sometimes in the most unusual ways, enabling us to make sense of sex and faith and to grow into gracious lovers. I believe that these grace-accompanied, internally created sexual ethics are more powerful and integrated into the person than an externally imposed rulebook. I posit that the human person is morally creative. It is something we do; we learn how to be with one another — which is the essence of ethics. We create a personal sexual ethic as we journey through life, learning in our bodies about ourselves and each other through encounters and wrestling with the values that are compelling to us. This is a creative process of crafting sexual wisdom that continues to be refined throughout our lives. It is a process of sexual-spiritual integration.

Sexuality and personhood

Before sketching a theory of sexual-spiritual integration, it is important to get a grip on what sexuality is. The term first appeared in English dictionaries in the early nineteenth century, and its meaning remains difficult to delimit (Farley 2006: 159). Contemporary definitions of human sexuality recognize it to be a feature of the human person that is shaped by biological, psychological, interpersonal and sociocultural factors (Scally 2000: 1; Bancroft 2009: 2). Different disciplines emphasize particular factors; for example, anthropologist Fisher (2004) focuses on the biologic foundations of sexual behaviour, whilst sociologists Gagnon and Simon (1973) stress the cultural construction of sex.¹ I created the heuristic model below to enable students to tease out and reflect upon different influences on an individual's sexuality. The petals of the flower intersect at the centre as the influences shape and are shaped by each other.

As I conducted the research, I attempted to think sexuality “through its very centre”, reflectively, to identify possible ontological aspects (Farley 1990: 11, 28–29). The stories the interviewees told about their sexual lives illustrated that:

- sex is developmental and impacted by the factors described in Figure 1;
- sex is expressive of identity and communicative in relationship;
- sex is employed for many purposes, but appears ultimately to have a joint and dynamic *telos* of identity and relationship, spurring encounters which form self and moral agency; that is, through the acceptance and expression of sexual being, we come to know ourselves as moral agents, capable of impacting others and of forming life-enhancing relationships;
- sex is linked to spirituality, engendering the capacity for self-knowledge, fruitful relationship with others, and potentially an apprehension of the Divine; and
- sexuality is a reflexive project that occurs in the liminal activity of wrestling self, others and sociocultural (including religious) tradition.

¹ Here “sexuality” refers to the broad concept of sexuality, “sexual expression” refers to sexual behaviour or acts, and “sex” is a short-hand term for both together.

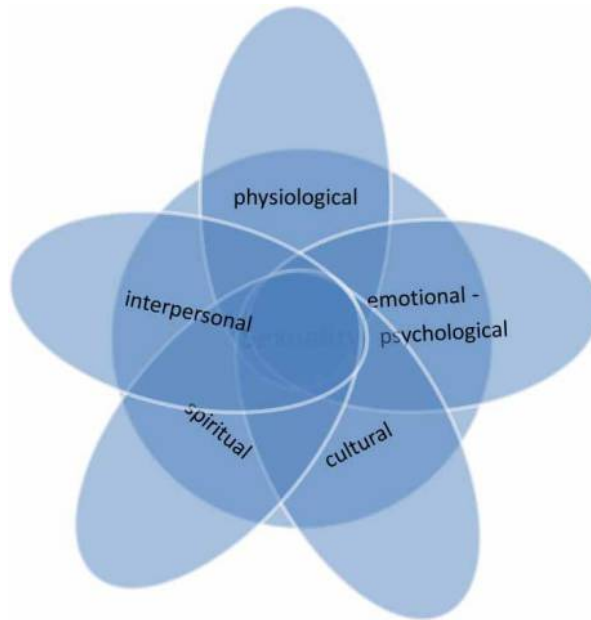


FIGURE 1 Heuristic Model of Human Sexuality.

Most intriguing is the link between sexuality and spirituality. Both are fundamentally relational, embodied and integral to identity, development, creativity and the capacity for committed relationship to others or to God (Timmerman 1993; see also Horn *et al.* 2005; Carr 2003; Nelson and Longfellow 1994). Timmerman argues that there are moments in sexual development that are instrumental in causing “the shift from child to adult, alone to connected, consumer of the emotional resources of humanity to generator of life and love” (2005: 578). In essence, our sexuality can call forth our growth into mature and faithful adulthood. Sexual awareness and expression can be sacramental.

A theory of sexual-spiritual integration

My findings led me to posit a phenomenology of formation, or sexual-spiritual integration, through the poesis (creation) of the story of one’s self and one’s sex, and the development of sexual phronesis (practical wisdom). Underpinning this theory are neuroscientist Damasio’s (2000: 189–200) hypotheses about how the brain works to construct the story of the self, and Ricoeur’s (1991: 432–34) theory of how the story of the self derives from the narrative intelligibility of lived experience. Sexual practical wisdom is garnered as the self makes sense of sexual experiences and encounters. This is a critical and liminal activity: lived experience generates embodied knowledge which enters into conversation with deeply held values derived from other sources of knowledge (e.g. Scripture, tradition, reason). The conversation is critical in that all the sources of knowledge are scrutinized for credibility and coherence with real life, as the person’s frame of reference allows. It is also

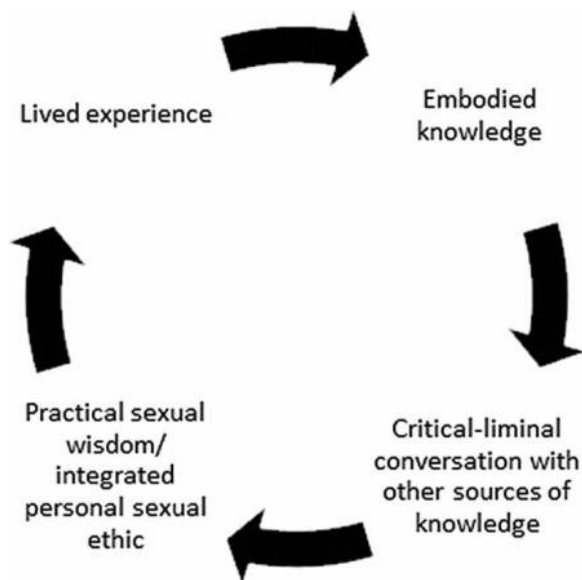


FIGURE 2 Theory of sexual-spiritual integration.

liminal. When I speak of integration as a liminal activity, I am referring to the particular qualities that attend liminal space that free and enable a person to create meaning: bounded safety, unself-conscious playfulness, openness to encounter, creative tension (i.e. metaphor, disorienting dilemma, paradox) and imagination. As a liminal process, integration may take place primarily under the surface of self-consciousness. Figure 2 attempts to describe what is happening:

The theory so modelled makes the creation of practical sexual wisdom look like it is an orderly, rational process. It is not. It is a liminal process engaging, first, life experience which can be painful, confusing or elating, and second, core parts of the person: emotion, self-perception, need for love, belonging to a larger whole, vulnerability, deeply held values. As such it is not surprising that integration is non-linear, often messy and sometimes difficult. Even the critical aspects of the process can be agonizing as old ideas die hard or foundations crumble before new understandings take root.

It is a complex process that I attempt to paint in broad brush. The complexities among individuals and in communities include: differing capacities for critical inquiry and for liminal engagement; differing valuing of sources of knowledge (e.g. for some Christians Scripture is the primary source for knowledge; for some personal experience is the lynchpin; for others experience is inherently suspect); and the challenges of validating lived experience as a source of knowledge about God. It is beyond the scope of this article to address this last complexity, except to note that, first, human experience is always interpreted, which interpretations are shaped by and shape the interpretation of other sources of knowledge; and, second, interpreted experience may be evaluated by a fruits test: has the experience as interpreted led to an increase in love?

Finally, the struggle to create what one participant termed “faithfully realistic” sexual ethics is an example of the moral creativity inherent in the human being — here I draw on the work of John Wall (2005).

Implications for theological education

The theory illustrated in Figure 2 underscores the power of embodied experience in the integration of sexuality and spirituality, something that Yip (2007; 2003) has observed in the crafting of sexual ethics by lesbian, gay and bisexual Christians and that my research cohort of primarily heterosexual participants confirms. Yet people are rarely asked to surface and reflect on their personal sexual knowledge, which is by nature tacit and subjugated (Scally 2000: 273–74). This is especially true in church settings where such reflection can be obstructed by fear, shame or secrecy. Common strategies for surviving theological education and advancing to ordination include “Don’t ask, don’t tell” (Grosch-Miller 2013: 52–57) and compartmentalization (Friberg and Laaser 1998: 94–99).

The implications for theological education include, first, the necessity of *creating safe enough space* for honest conversation within the individual and among diverse people. Safer space strategies include: a fundamental respect for the human person and the highly individual process of integration; normalizing difference as historically part of the Christian tradition; and the creation of a classroom etiquette that includes confidentiality, listening, understanding-seeking and mutual care. Second, *critical engagement with all four sources of theology* — Scripture, tradition, experience (one’s own and others) and reason (both a methodology and bodies of human knowledge) — must be resourced. Helpful explorations include surfacing contextual information about Scripture, mapping the dynamism of the Christian tradition over the centuries regarding sex, and discussing the value and the challenge of each of the four sources of theology. Finally, opportunities for the surfacing of and *reflection on personal sexual knowledge* must be offered, with an eye to encouraging a practice of *reflexivity*. Given the tacit, subjugated nature of personal sexual knowledge, oblique methods (e.g. word association, free writing, using images or stories as portals) are particularly helpful (Grosch-Miller 2013: 144–60). Oblique methods engage the liminal space in which narrative identity is formed as people make sense of their experience. Such excavation of personal knowledge can only be by invitation and must never be coerced. Nor should people be asked or required to share personal information under any circumstances.

Shades of grace

Grace occurs in the critical-liminal conversation. I propose a definition of “grace” derived from Rowan Williams’s understanding of revelation as “the meaning of the word ‘God’ [establishing] itself among us as the loving and nurturing advent of *newness* in human life” (2007: 30; emphasis original). Grace manifests itself in moments of insight or vision; deepened acceptance and awareness of self, other and God; increased capacity for love; and whenever the soul is moved from despair to hope, from death to new life.

Now the tone changes as we move from the head to the heart and the body. This second half of the article plumbs the liminal spaces of story and poetics to explore where grace may be found in the journey of crafting our personal ethics.

And now we speak of deep down things
 Of dust and dreams and daring do,
 Of fragments lying on the ground,
 And weeping wounds and shouts of joy.
 The mirror shards reflect the light.
 The dancers fly and melt and coo.
 Love has her way, she'll always do,
 Her tender violence that will woo
 One alone
 One unknown.
 (Grosch-Miller 2013: 13)

The grace of desire

As I reflected on the sexual journeys I heard, I was struck by the role of desire as a force that drives us towards self-identity and towards relationship. I noticed how sexuality and sexual expression aim the individual towards both becoming an “I” and towards some kind of relating to others, thus I theorized a joint *telos* to sex of identity/agency and relationship. The “I” and “We” desires are in dynamic and creative relationship. Lynd describes this as a dialectical process:

Openness to relatedness with other persons and the search for self-identity are not two problems but one dialectical process; as one finds more relatedness to other persons one discovers more of oneself; as the sense of one's own identity becomes clearer and more firmly rooted one can more completely go out to others. (1958: 241)

Desire drives sexual development. In relationship we come to know ourselves and another, and we take the risk of being known. Recall the biblical use of the Hebrew verb “to know” to denote sexual relations (Gen. 4:1).

Thinkers as diverse as Philip Sheldrake and Susan Griffin observe that desire “leads us to the sacred” (Griffin 1982: 262; Sheldrake 2001). It is an extraordinary grace that we are made so that we desire personal fulfilment and intimate connection with others, and that becoming an “I” enables our ability to connect with others and vice versa. This grace can connect us to all of life: erotic desire “opens us to sensuous connection with another person, a poem, a piece of nature, the world ... [And] on another level, ... opens us to experiencing God loving us in and through those things” (Carr 2003: 149).

This is the most potentially scandalous story I will share. It is the story of “Shaun”,² who married relatively young, was a dutiful husband, worked long hours and drank too much. The marriage failed, his wife finding a more responsive partner and leaving him. This event triggered in Shaun intense exploration of

² All stories and quotes recounted in this part of the article are from research participants further discussed in Grosch-Miller 2013.

everything in his life, including his relationship with God. The way he put it was that the divorce became the impetus for “deep personal exploration, self-awareness, growing God consciousness”. At one point he became sexually involved with a married woman, breaching not only her marital vows but also her professional ethics. He described the relationship this way:

There was immense emotional connection, really profound, and the sex was um phenomenal through the time we were together ... It showed me what sex between two people who were really fully engaged with each other could be. It was the total experience, you know, physical, mental, spiritual ... and it was wonderful.

I asked how it ended:

I began to um [long silence] I sort of gradually ... this is somebody who's married to somebody else began to... it was the apple in the garden ... It was not congruent with my ... spiritual moral framework that I was having an adulterous affair, and I suppose coupled with that ... was knowing that her husband was as emotionally and mentally fragile as he was, that knowing [my wife] leaving me nearly killed me ... knowing what that had done to me, that because we had this thing, you know, Abelard and Heloise and never mind the rest of the world wasn't ... the grand scheme of things is bigger than that and you can't just be your own little dyad and ignore the impact that your actions might have on other people.

He reflected further on what he had learnt from the experience:

I suppose it would be fair to say that it was the only mature sexual relationship I've had. It was but boy was it ... a full and an amazingly fruitful burgeoning expression of sexuality. So in that sense it showed me, and certainly when I think about it in terms of my ministry, in terms of experiencing the ... real wonder of a really full sexual relationship, ... my ministry, my life would be the poorer for not having experienced it in that way to that depth ...

When sex is at its best it's the language of the trinity, it's perichoresis, it's mutual indwelling, it's the complete giving and receiving of just being in and with each other and uh no worries about performance, no worries ... just an ultimate form of communication and of being so in that way, it was different and full and rich and I'm very pleased that I've had that experience in my life ...

If God, in the nature of what God is, is unknowable, in the *mysterium stricte dictum mysterium logicum* sense, that is beyond what we know but we can have glimpses, it seems to me He's given us that form of relationship ... and mirrored in other ways, parent-child, friendship, all of these different forms of love and of the expression of love allow us to touch the godhead and experience God in different ways. And sexuality is one of those ways ... that sexual experience in its fullest sense is I think a sacred reflection of what God is like and what He wants us to be and what He wants us to be to each other.

Shaun's insights are profound. They signal the potential for working with sexual experience in a framework that recognizes the link between sexuality and spirituality as the basis for Christian sexual ethics and reflexive moral formation. They also affirm that sexual expression can be a “lower-case sacrament of the presence of the incomprehensible God” (Lawler and Salzman 2011: 170). It is important to

note that Shaun was able to have a fully mature sexual relationship only after significant reflexive activity; he said, “I couldn’t have done it ... with all that fear and false ego stuff, I’d have been too afraid to expose myself totally to another person.” One has to be sufficiently secure in oneself to risk the vulnerability of an intimate sexual relationship. Recall the joint dynamism of identity and relationship. And notice the power of desire: desire for love, desire for sex, desire for God. In time these desires led Shaun not only to engage in fulsome, mutual sexual expression but also to construct an internalized Christian sexual ethic that was respectful of the power and the consequences of sexual expression.

Even our transgressions are the site of operant grace, opening us to the depth and breadth of self-giving love of God and neighbour. This is not to say that all desires acted upon lead to the sacred; they do not. A discussion of disordered desire, the education of desire and the necessity of discernment in desire is beyond the scope of this article.

The graces in vulnerability

Sex is an arena where we are profoundly vulnerable and can be deeply wounded. The word “vulnerability” comes from the Latin “vulnus”, meaning wound. Desire “impels us to seek out bodily connection with others, risking suffering in the process” (Carr 2003: 147).

Sexual vulnerability is inherent, emotional and embodied. It is inherent in that we are “no longer in charge” of who we are in a sexual relation: we are dependent on the other’s receiving of us (Williams 2002: 313). It is emotional in that sexual rejection or reciprocation impacts our sense of self and our capacity to flourish. It is embodied through our naked defencelessness in the sexual act and in our vulnerability to sexual violence. Timmerman credits the vulnerability of an embodied sexual relationship with helping people “to see and show themselves without pretended strength or beauty or virtue” (1993: 73; see also Lawler and Salzman 2011: 170–71). Senior Kinsey researcher John Bancroft (2009: 3) believes that the vulnerability inherent in sexual expression, as much as the pleasure of sexual contact, is what creates the bonding effects of sexual congress.

Our vulnerability in sexual desire and expression helps make sexual encounters liminal, creative spaces from which we emerge changed and through which we create a personal sexual ethic. Our vulnerability, if we are self-aware and thoughtful, drives our moral agency: knowing we can be hurt, we know our actions can hurt others. Shaun’s story above shows that.

In vulnerability we glimpse several shades of grace:

- in the ability to accept and love our imperfect and vulnerable selves (we are beloved daughters and sons of the living God, that is our graced beginning);
- in the spilling over of self-belovedness into love for others, recognizing their uniqueness and vulnerability (a sense of self is the basis for moral agency; knowing and valuing oneself, one learns to value others (Ricoeur 1992));
- in the crafting — through the trial and error of experience — of a personal sexual ethic; and

- in the patient exercise of forgiveness, receiving it and extending it when it is the right time. (Sexual wounds can be deep wounds; forgiveness can be a long journey and should never be forced.)

When Maryanne was just entering puberty, she was home alone when the phone rang:

This sort of pervert rang and asked me all these questions. And he started by posing as a researcher and asking me kind of easy questions, but they got progressively more horrible and a lot to do with periods and sanitary towels and tampons and things and my mother, and questions about her breasts and did I kiss her and horrible, really weird stuff, and I hung up at some point ... but I could remember the questions, there was obviously a question at which I thought oh no this is really ... but I went with it for a while and then I felt this huge sense of shame and self-blame that I hadn't hung up earlier.

When Maryanne volunteered to participate in my research, she quipped that she had nothing to offer. The later emergence of this memory surprised her. She said:

I actually had to do this exercise where I spoke to that twelve-year-old me, because she's still there ... kind of bewildered and angry and not sure what the anger and the fear and the shame ... that was good. That kind of talking to your earlier self I find quite a useful exercise sometimes and then bringing God into that conversation and allowing whatever God wants to do with it too.

I was surprised that it affected me so powerfully ... obviously that was quite a moment when for me I just became very ashamed about my body and especially becoming a woman, I think because he sexualized my mother's body and then my adolescent, pubescent body, I just thought 'uch, it's all yucky, it's all horrible'. [pause] So then you spend the rest of your life unlearning that. [laughing]

As an adult Maryanne experienced multiple miscarriages. In her talk with her twelve-year-old self, after reassuring her that what had happened was unusual and that there were some sick people in the world, she spoke to her about menstruation being natural and curiosity being normal. Then she reflected more on blood:

So I talked to her like that and then ... my mind turned to the fact that blood had become a kind of big issue for me, and so ... it's interesting that that was sort of the first time that I really experienced blood as shameful.

I had multiple miscarriages and spent a long time bleeding, just in the way that you do after a miscarriage ... now I'm pre-menopausal and again blood is a big issue ... so it's still kind of this ongoing part of my sexuality actually has been to deal with what do I do with all the blood? It's not in the magazines or the movies or textbooks, ... and it's hard to feel really positive, obviously, about your body if you're really bleeding a lot ... when you have had [several] years of losing babies and then you've got to deal with the fact that you won't have ... the family you wanted, but also that your womb is a place of death, it's a tomb, and it's a very big process to kind of come back from that into a place where you're really positive about your body and your sexuality and you can celebrate that it can be yeah a place of creation again somehow when it so manifestly hasn't worked in that way that you hoped it would. So part of what I was saying to that twelve-year-old was, you know, how this will develop — this will be something you'll have to grapple with, these feelings of blood and shamefulness. And also really a lack of control around those things.

Maryanne's story shows how she consolidated her learning and reframed the story of herself and sex over time, in the end exercising her imagination, entering liminal space into which she invited God, to integrate her twelve-year-old and adult selves.

Reflecting on the journey of accepting her body and her sexuality, she named her marriage as a grace. She said: "I guess the grace of a marriage is that it encourages someone to just accept [you] through all those, the sickness and health line is really important." Maryanne's experience moved her into the sacramental branch of the church; she needed a positive experience of blood and to be held by ancient tradition. Over time, Maryanne constructed a redeeming story out of the vulnerability of her body and her encounter with others (a "pervert" and her husband), aided by the stories, symbols and rites of her faith and the presence of God. Such storytelling is a graced exercise of poetic phronesis, centred in the body:

In the body.
That's where it begins,
not in the head.
In the body that bleeds,
that struggles and strives,
in the vulnerable body,
the body that cries,
the body that aches.

'Creation is a bloody business.'
Muck and mess,
overflow and expulsion,
rhythm and rest.
In the body.

The chalice is shared in the body,
the body accepted and accepting,
the body cherished and cherishing,
the body freed and freeing.

Love is born
in the body.
(Grosch-Miller 2013: 107–108)

The grace of honesty

There are other shades of grace active in our sexual journeys. And there are things that are barriers to grace and things that open up the way for grace. Dishonesty impedes grace. When we cannot be honest about who we are, the consequences of our actions or any number of other things, grace stalls out. We are cut off from the truth, cut off from our natural state as learners, cut off from growing in grace in that particular area of our lives. In Roman mythology, Veritas/Truth is the mother of Virtue. Being honest opens the gates of heaven.

For years I believed that my first sexual experience at age fifteen was “under duress”, and to some extent that was true. But that wasn’t the whole story. When I reflected more deeply on that event, I learned some important truths about agency, power, knowledge, the culture I grew up in and natural sexual curiosity. Here are excerpts from my account of first intercourse after months of pressure that confused me and made me feel desirable and powerful:

I don’t know what got into me that day.
 One moment I was walking through town,
 erect of posture, full of power and agency,
 deciding that today just might be the day...
 The next, I was half naked on the blue sofa
 after the short sharp thrust
 that ended my innocence
 and bled away my illusions.

I had chosen, but I felt it had been under duress.
 For years, even decades, I believed that...

Until I remembered my own preening,
 the swaggering choice
 that put me on that couch.
 As much actor as acted upon,
 I had to own up,
 remember rightly,
 and claim the power
 of my detached and curious desire.

There is grace in honest self-examination (Volf 2007). Working through my sexual-spiritual autobiography I experienced the grace of growing into my own moral agency.

The grace of wrestling with angels and demons

The Christian tradition has included some unhelpful, inhumane and even dangerous ideas and attitudes about sex. Christians who take the Bible and tradition very seriously may have to wrestle these in order to come to an integrated, affirming personal sexual ethic. This is a morally creative and graced process: there is grace in honest grappling with God and all the ways we know of God as we make sense of sex and faith.

Figure 3 is a photograph of a 4’ x 6’ artwork that Ruth created while in ministerial training. The figure is an outline of her body and the title of the piece is written in the head and throat: *This is the resurrection of my body; let it speak*. The black bands are made of scratchy cloth and contain what she and other young women have heard in church about their sexuality; FEAR features strongly. The words written on bandages outside her body are negative things that the Bible or tradition has said about women’s bodies or sexuality; they are falling off, as Lazarus’s bandages fell off when he was raised from the tomb. The words written in her body are in her own hand, declaring her embodied knowledge of the goodness of sex



FIGURE 3 This is the resurrection of my body; let it speak. By Ruth, used with permission.

and bodies. This is a very powerful piece, which she reflects enabled her own sexual-spiritual integration. Some months after she completed it she met the woman she later married. She credits having done this work with being able to give herself permission to seek a relationship with her partner when she met her.

Final thoughts

And what do I make of God?
Animator, Lover,

Subverter, Irrepressible God?

We speak of sex,
fearfully, gratefully.
God as Eros has infiltrated,
exploded and invigorated our lives.
We ache for touch and acceptance and love;

desire drives us towards each other
 and towards our own wholeness.
 We learn of the depth and power of love
 in sexual congress,
 blessed and not blessed by Church.
 Our sexual lives reveal our having been made
 in the image of the Great Lover,
 expressing our uniqueness
 and cementing our belonging.
 Our moral agency is fomented and formed
 as we witness the consequences of lovers chosen
 and sex acts engaged in.

God is all over this project,
 in ways expected and unexpected.
 The divine fingerprint is never far
 from the human heart or the human body.

Made as learners,
 we grow into our capacity to love,
 to make choices that
 serve the well-being of
 self and other.
 Made as lovers,
 our story is never our own;
 we are made in relationship,
 made for relationship.
 Made as glimmer in our Parent's eye,
 our sex is method, means and manner
 of becoming Person-Gift,
 telos and tikkum olam.³

The kiss of life,
 the divine bending tenderly
 over dust and clay,
 goes on ...

Thanks be to God for the many shades of grace that lead us into love.

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³ *Tikkum olam* is Hebrew for "repair of the world".

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