

# SEX, POWER and SPIRIT

## - jottings from a Humanistic notebook

Nick Duffel & Helena Løvendal Sørensen

As a working husband and wife team, Helena and I were saddened to hear of the separation of the married actors, Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman, who starred in the film, *Eyes Wide Shut*. To us, this is one of the most important movies of the last 30 years for its understanding, unparalleled in popular culture, of sexuality and relationship - which is what sexuality is, at heart. After seeing the film, we wondered what effect playing such roles might have on the real-life couple. We empathise with them, since while preparing seminars and workshops on relationships and sexuality over the years, we have experienced a force come between us that seems to have the power to rip us apart. We have only recently been learning how to deal with this.

Previously, we described the difficulty of counselling couples while our own relationship was having difficulties. Both our professional and our private lives compelled us to look for ways to put the jigsaw of human sexuality together. In this issue, I discuss *Eyes Wide Shut*, since it appears to map out a direction which westerners must take, if we are to develop away from the obsession with fantasy and image-based sexuality and the epidemic of relationship break-ups in our culture. To introduce the context within which I see this film, I first present an outline model of sexuality, with which we now work.

### **The Void of Sexuality**

We were at the end of our training in a discipline which emphasised the Spirit in psychology. This was well and good, but we soon discovered how untrained we were to meet what came to us when we started work. In a busy high-street counselling service we were inundated by sexual abuse

cases, as well as by individuals and couples with relational and sexual problems. These two issues took up two thirds of our practice. Why were we so unprepared?

Looking back, it is easy now to see that our training had no proper model for sexuality; nor, in fact, did it seem to

have one for the body. Worse, it tended to imply that sexual abuse survivors could be part of a culture of complaint, which was extremely unfashionable in the world of 'taking responsibility for creating my own reality'. Although this reflected mainstream society, we felt certain that this attitude was wrong, and we decided that we had to rapidly get ourselves some further training in sexual-abuse work and relationship issues, in order to serve our clients properly.

In time, we became faculty members at the same training organisation. Sadly, much of our spare time was taken up, not with research and refinement of the theory, but in bewailing and reeling from injustices within the organisation, which seemed to be addicted to an unconscious misuse of power. Eventually we left. We now understand that the abuse of power is inevitable in a system or society which puts Spirit in 'the wrong place', and exiles the understanding of sexuality.

Workers in the field of sexual abuse frequently maintain that the dynamics involved are more about the abuse of power than sex. But at that time, we simply knew that there was something which our society was not adequately dealing with, and it had to do with sexuality. At the same time, the everyday world we lived in seemed increasingly saturated with images of sex, as if our culture had an insatiable excitement without any real understanding. In our private life, sexuality had the power to take us very quickly into conflict. We concluded that we had to find some sophisticated training in sexual matters, and so to this end we invested every spare minute and penny we could muster.

## **Searching for Sexual Knowledge**

Finding the source was easier said than done. The first thing we discovered was that, despite its beginnings, psychology seemed to have all but abandoned sexuality. The Reichians appeared the most promising, but perhaps because Wilhelm Reich came to a sticky end - experimenting with extreme implications of sexual energetics in God's Own Country at its most suspicious moment in history - many of his followers seemed less sure about sexuality. Bionenergetics and Biosynthesis practitioners appeared more comfortable with catharsis and the unlocking of emotional tensions held in the body.

We knew we had to go back to where Freud had left off. We understood how prevalent sexual abuse was, and suspected that Freud's famous abandonment of the abuse theory in favour of Oedipal seduction fantasies marked the limit of where he was able to get to, rather than the end of the line. We sympathised, appreciating how hard it was to go on working in the world of such revelations, almost alone. We began to consider Freud as a pioneer who had just scratched the surface of sexuality. Our questing for the cutting-edge teachers of the day finally lead us to America and Holland.

We were drawn to a Native American shaman who looked and spoke like a right-wing Texan truck-driver - somewhat alarming! - but had some profound and reverential ideas about sexuality. However, getting knowledge from SwiftDeer, who turned out to be half Irish and half Cherokee, meant that we had to submit ourselves personally. This was very confronting for me, brought up in an English family

and boarding schools from the fifties. Despite spending much of the sixties and seventies as a rebel, and getting plenty of sexual experience, there were many layers of guilt and shame around my body and sexuality that had to be peeled away - both painfully and joyfully. For Helena it was less threatening, for she had been brought up in benign post-sixties Denmark and had spent time in the Rajneesh communities in Oregon and Suffolk.

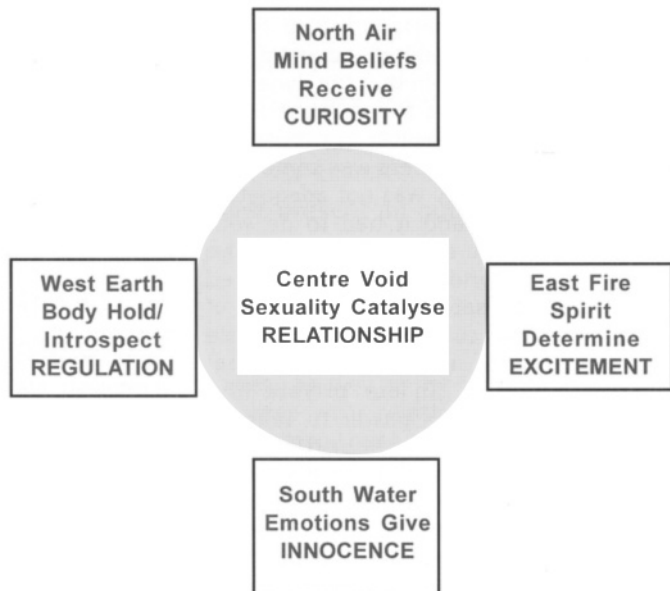
Next we studied and trained with Willem Poppeliers, who is based in Holland. Poppeliers is the originator of *Sexual Grounding Therapy* - a discipline based on Reichian work. His genius is to have systematised a developmental model of human sexuality, to have completed Freud's work on the Oedipal complex and its impact on Object Relations. His work combines Tantric and Reichian understanding of the importance of the primal sexual energy field, and the difference between men and women, in terms of their energetic 'charging' of heart and genitals.

Space is too short to give anything but the briefest sample of our learning from these teachers. I present a simplified model which draws from both these disciplines, as a short attempt to put sexuality in its rightful place. The basic pattern comes from a non-western source, which I

hope readers will allow, given the absence of knowledge which remains this area in the West (including the westernised 'New World').

### Sex in its rightful place

Indigenous peoples have no problem in imagining sexuality to be at the centre of human experience. It is not seen as a recreational activity, but rather as the force that creates all life, through the coming together of opposites, male and female. As such it is the energy that creates and catalyses all life. The Medicine Wheel, (fig 1) based on the compass points, is an apparently simple, but effective and extremely sophisticated learning tool, which gives contextual and developmental sequence. The wheel shown here describes five aspects of experience, with which humanistic practitioners will be very familiar: body, mind, feelings, spirituality and sexuality. The place of sexuality is



central, at the hub of the wheel, or the place of the Void.

All aspects are associated with elements, and have functions. The function of sexuality is to process, or catalyse, the oppositional natures of the other elements. These include the classic dichotomy between body and spirit, as well as the psychological tension between mind and emotions. The latter also represents the tension between Inner Parent and Inner Child, in the sense that this polarity develops into 'internal objects'.

Many popular depictions of the Medicine Wheel omit the central and crucible-like position of sexuality, probably under the influence of Western Christian sensibilities. This is regrettable, and can perhaps be traced to a similar attitude to that which guided the missionaries in the New World. Amongst the first actions of these zealots was getting the 'natives' to cover up their naked breasts and genitals, for which they as yet had no shame. They thereby exported Adam and Eve's fig-leaves, trading the white man's shame for his innocence, for his nakedness (meaning both the body and the 'naked-truth'), and his sexuality, in exchange for a set of beliefs about the European concept of Spirit.

The function of the aspects make clear how our society has strayed from a natural path, by misusing or misplacing them. I hope the reader will not experience what follows as over-moralising, but rather as an attempt at an explanation.

Mind is associated with Air and is for *receiving* - yet we have made the mind king in our world, and are slaves to our mental fantasies. Feeling is associated with Water and is for *giving*. Humanistic practitioners know

better than most how our feelings have been repressed by the mind and become held in the body. Body is linked to Earth and its function is to *hold and be introspective* - yet we tend to objectify and abuse our bodies. Spirit is the illuminating Fire, and its function is to *determine*.

**If the functions of the quadrant are out of synch, then the centre energy can no longer process oppositions, nor catalyse the whole. The capacity for healthy renewal is lost.**

'Determining' does not mean 'trying to become spiritual' - in the sense that Trungpa warned us about - but rather being guided by openness to Spirit's nature, instead of letting mind-sets or beliefs (Mind), determine our life-choices. Additionally, the East and the West are associated with Masculinity and Femininity, and the centre is their creative and alchemical melting pot.

If the functions of the quadrant are out of synch, then the centre energy can no longer process oppositions, nor catalyse the whole. The capacity for healthy renewal is lost. The result is that people become repressed, fantasy-driven, power-abusing, non-organismic, or ill in their or sexual centres. Might this have something to

do with the prevalence of Aids, and prostate and breast cancers in our culture?

In order to look further at sexuality I have added onto this basic wheel five aspects of sexuality, abstracted from Sexual Grounding theory. We start in the south with *Innocence*, the childlike quality, without guilt or shame, with which we all once approached sexuality. Perhaps it is this quality which abusers hope to regain when they imagine that there is something of sexual power for them to take from an innocent child. Next we go north, to mind, and find *Curiosity*. Just as our society is mentally over-stimulated, we have over-inflated our sexual curiosity, through making sex cut off and taboo. But innocent children are always curious, especially about genitals at the age of three or four - until we prohibit their curiosity and shame them. With shame in their minds, they now belong to conventional society.

Now we turn to the east, and here we are inflamed with *Excitement*. Possibly this is the quality most easy to recognise, but it brings us to the question "What do we do with this excitement, how do we direct it?" It has to be directed, or it gets out of hand. A lack of proper harnessing or regulation is a catastrophe. Rape is sex unregulated. In the West, we have answered this question by going north to the mind, to our beliefs, rather than to the west, which here is the place of *Regulation* - in and through the body and the earth. In this model, regulation is more organic than patriarchal, more to do with limitations than control, mediated by Spirit on the opposite pole. This may explain why our culture has jumped in one leap from repression into hedonism, without

any idea how to teach our young sexual manners, or even what to base our ideas upon.

**Popular music and films are often a means for gauging our collective understanding of our place in the world, and for seeing what is emerging to inspire us.**

In the centre we come to the energy which again makes the whole wheel turn. *Relationship* is the key mature aspect of sexuality, it is the one which is missing in much of our mental fantasy life, in the images used by the advertisers, in the bath-houses of San Francisco. It is the only quality which can move us beyond our loneliness or the polarised selfishness of objectifying the other. But it is the one which demands most of us, which requires us to be at home in our self-concepts, and to engage the psychological work necessary to rediscover the potency of intimacy.

### **Applying sexual understanding**

How are we to apply our understanding of the subtle but crucial nuances of the interplay between sex, power and spirit? We cannot fully hope to accomplish change by educating or legislating from our beliefs, even if they are good ones. One idea is to be open for what positive inspirations are emerging in the culture itself, perhaps

from leading lights in the arts. Popular music and films are often a means for gauging our collective understanding of our place in the world, and for seeing what is emerging to inspire us. Bernie Woode has shown how powerful films are as media for expressing that which individuals cannot yet name in their lives.

In this context, I want to point readers to a recent movie which speaks to a deep understanding of the place of sex and relationship in our culture. This film moves interestingly around the wheel, and ends with a soulful discovery of the potency of intimacy. Excitement fired by Innocence backfires; consequently a lack of Curiosity about the other leads to fantasies, whose un-Regulated Excitement evokes a potential disaster - until the hero is mature enough to begin conscious Relationship with the one he is already with.

But let me not spoil the plot!

### **Sex and Intimacy in the movies**

Stanley Kubric's last film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, provocative as it is, is not 'an astonishing tour de force of eroticism' as the *Evening Standard* suggests. It is far more important than that. The key to this profound movie is in its title, *Eyes Wide Shut*. It shows how a couple can be in an intimate sexual relationship and completely miss each other, and it recounts the consequences which can ensue. In particular, the husband has his eyes wide shut, and the marriage is all but destroyed. In the very last moments there is a redemption. The wife declares that they have now - through the process they have undergone - awoken. And they re-choose each other. They have made it - but only just.

*Eyes Wide Shut* is the masterpiece of a dying film maker. Kubric was busy with the profundities of life in all his movies. That he should make his final film about love and relationship - choosing a real-life husband and wife to star in it - says much about how important he must have considered the subject matter. Such gravitas enriches the carefully coded study of love that the film is. But here all is not what it seems. The most dramatic episodes are the least significant, the most domestic ones the most heavily charged with meaning. It seems to be all about sex - but it is not.

At an unusually slow pace, the film obsessively deals with the subjects of love, relationship and intimacy, though to the casual observer it is steeped in excitement and eroticism. The truth is that there is plenty of sexuality in the film, but more accurately the role of sex is - as it is in life - to be the catalytic force which creates, impels and changes us. This is the deeper side of sex which our culture generally overlooks.

Principally the film is not *about* sex, but about *seeing* and transformation. It is about whether we look beyond the surface of things, whether we live behind our masks, whether we can be really bothered to look into another person, and dare to go for intimacy (into-me-see). Otherwise we may treat the other as only an image, and therefore an object for our desires or fantasies. This is deathly. What is shocking in the film is not the eroticism (that is not even very arousing) but the extent to which humans can exploit each other as if they were objects to be used and then disposed of. This is acutely demonstrated through the characters of the party-host and the costume-

renter. These two abuse their power, feeding off and destroying the innocence in their care.

The film is like a dream or mythological journey. Time spans are not literal, and characters are like archetypal dream figures. The Tom Cruise character is the perfect handsome dutiful husband married to a glamorous woman, played by Nicole Kidman. But there is something in their intimate life which seems not to satisfy her.

One night, at an opulent party, she resists a seducer, who attempts to tantalise her with the notion of marriage as a launching place for selfish hedonism. Later, having temporarily left the rational world through taking drugs, she challenges her husband about his fidelity. He responds that he would never be unfaithful: he loves her, she is *his* wife, and she is *beautiful*. But this won't do: she is enraged. We, the viewers, can imagine that this is because it is not *about* her, that she feels objectified. He can own her, want to fuck her, but can he care about her? Their current level of married bliss is no longer enough for her.

So she tests him further by describing her fantasies concerning a single glance she once received from a naval officer. The passion which this look promised was enough to make her risk everything, even her family; and yet it made her love her husband even more. In other words, she needs more than a basic static level of married intimacy - she needs passion and dynamism to enrich her love.

But the husband just does not get it. He becomes jealous and feels cheated. He becomes obsessed with his

fantasies of her and the sailor. The picture that runs inside his head is not one of intense intimate passion, but of raunchy sex between strangers. And next, he sets out to get some for himself, by means of various chance encounters. Through one mythic night he acts-out in secret and puts himself at grave risk. However, he fails to satisfy his excitement and curiosity. He never actually finds what he is looking for. But he does run into unexpected intimacy. The most intimate scene is when he is with a masked woman with a perfect body, and he wants to see her face. Eventually, she gives her life for him.

In effect, he receives nothing but utter kindness from all the women he meets. At the same time, his wife goes on a parallel dream journey, in which she is an object of shame. But they are in separate worlds, polarised, and drifting apart.

### **The power to transform**

After his long Odyssey, the husband finally comes home. His wife is asleep, and next to her, on the pillow, he sees his missing costume-mask. In a flash, grief and remorse overtake him. He finally realises that she has been living with half-a-man, one who has been masked and blind. He sees that he has been running his life from his driven ego-personality, (*persona* is Greek for mask), from the power of his role, rather than from his soul. Now that he is finally able to *really* feel something, he is able to look at his wife fully in the face. She (and the other female/anima characters) have provided him with a mirror in which he is now able to see the catastrophic journey he has been on, driven by his own fantasies, servicing his own

neediness, to find an erotic adventure. He has awoken to his shame, not a *neurotic* shame as Adam and Eve's (where the whole cultural mess started) but to his *existential* shame of how he failed to honour his 'naked' truth, and relate honestly to his beloved.

Now that he has 'seen' himself he can awaken to her - if she still wants him to. The closing words are spoken by the wife: 'We have one thing more to do - we need to fuck.' This fucking is something which is neither naive nor obsessive - it is awoken, intimate, jointly chosen. They have polarised, and now they have grieved - to complete their healing they must unite in the age-old simple way. This is awakened power and sexuality: it creates an alchemy which we call 'Potent Intimacy'.

*Eyes Wide Shut* accurately describes how easily men and women miss each other and drift apart, to polarise as enemies, or settle for a quiet loneliness. It is inevitable, for men and women are different in their centres of charge and in their imaginations. They have entirely different fantasy lives. In her imagination, she harbours a longing for intimacy, which needs to be satisfied before she is ready for sex. He, for his part, needs sex before he is ready for intimacy. He leads, as is were, with his genitals, and she with her heart - no wonder it is so easy to miss each other!

The eyes are the tools of the heart, and if they are shut the heart will be too. But when through his search the husband awakens to his heart - and the medium is grief, as it always is - and can make it available in the relationship, she opens to him sexually, and the circle can be completed, the medicine wheel has been spun.

## Further reading

Wooder, Bernie. *Metta, Jesus and MGM*, Vol 28 No 2 *Self & Society*, June 2000.

Trungpa, Chogyam. (1987). *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, Shambhala, Boston & London.

Reagan, Harley SwiftDeer. (1980) *Shamanic Wheels and Keys*. DTMMS, Scottsdale, Arizona.

Løvendal Sørensen, Helena and Duffell, Nick. *Professional, Personal and Private - the challenge of working creatively with couples*, Vol 27 No 4 *Self & Society*, September 1999.

Jacoby, Mario. (1994). *Shame and the Origins of Self-esteem - A Jungian Approach*, Routledge, London.

Duffell, Nick. (2000). *The Making of Them*, Lone Arrow Press, London.

Somé, Malidoma Patrice. (1999). *The Healing Wisdom of Africa*, Thorsons, London.

*Nick Duffell is an accredited psychotherapist, Sexual Grounding Therapist, freelance trainer, and the author of The Making of Them.*

*With his wife Helena Løvendal Sørensen he co-founded the Centre for Gender Psychology. They will be making a presentation at the Findhorn conference Sex and Spirit in October this year. Their book, Sex, Love and the Dangers of Intimacy, (working title) is to be published by Thorsons soon. In partnership with Re•Vision they run a post-graduate training in 'Contextual Couple Counselling'.*

*Nick can be contacted on  
Nick@genderpsychology.com*

