



Perspective

The Great Sex Charade and the Loss of Intimacy

JAMES E. LODER

*Princeton Theological Seminary
Princeton, New Jersey*

Yes, the spirit is everything.

—Sigmund Freud.¹

THIS ARTICLE, WRITTEN FROM THE STANDPOINT OF CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY IN THE Reformed tradition, is building an hypothesis that has proved workable in my own counseling practice but has not yet been empirically demonstrated. It is not without empirical substantiation, however, as at least one study will show. My training at the Massachusetts Mental Health Center drew upon the wisdom of the training analyst Semrad. Semrad was the archetype of the wise old man, with bushy white hair and a benign fatherly face. I was told that, before he came to Harvard, he spent several years working in mental hospitals in the midwest, learning how schizophrenics think. He had a profound intuition and a powerful way of putting his under-

¹Cited in Ludwig Binswanger, *Sigmund Freud: Reminiscences of a Friendship* (New York: Grune & Stratton, 1957) 81. Freud continued, “[Humanity] has always known that it possesses spirit; I had to show it that there are also instincts.” See also W. W. Meissner, *Freud and Psychoanalysis* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2000) xiii.

JAMES E. LODER is Mary D. Synnott Professor of the Philosophy of Christian Education. He is the author of *The Transforming Moment*, *The Knight’s Move*, and *The Logic of the Spirit*.

The great sex charade is our cultural celebration of sexuality as the major indicator of human intimacy. Genuine intimacy is defined by spiritual intimacy, and it is this that must be the focus of all Christian counseling.

standings in plain talk: “The most significant learning comes from the seat of your pants,” he said. Many of his pithy sayings have been collected in a book by his trainees.²

The Semrad saying I recall and propose to focus on here is this: “Couples never argue about money.” In apparent fact, this is incorrect. Couples do indeed argue about money, but in reality they are arguing about something much deeper, like trust. They prefer to argue about money, because it is not as close to the heart as trust; so they drain off their anxieties about trust in less threatening surrogate forms. However one might designate this displacement of the issue, the basic point is that the poignant issues closest to us, most powerfully tied to our selfhood, are the least likely to get into public view, even in the closeness of marriage. Instead, they are coded in matters which are at a safe distance from the heart, but close enough to allow a direct transfer of feeling. This psychological maneuver raises the key issues behind the questions I am pursuing: “What is intimacy?” and “Why and how does it elude our attention?” Let’s take the second question first.

As the title of this essay suggests, intimacy eludes our attention in many ways but most prominently by hiding behind the false assumption that sexuality is the major indicator of intimacy. The great sex charade is the popular celebration in the media and in our society and culture at large of sexuality as the major indicator of intimacy between persons. Our culture is rife with the attention-getting power of sexuality, and we are saturated with the notion that sexual attractiveness is the key to interpersonal success and true happiness. But we do not ask what is at the core of interpersonal success. Culturally co-opted sexuality is a charade, a game designed to conceal the underlying reality it suggests. It is a deceitful rampant pretense to satisfy something in us that is far more profound, namely, the longing for an intimacy that ultimately ties us into the life of God.

What is meant by intimacy? Thomas Oden, in his book *Game Free: The Meaning of Intimacy*, focuses on the Latin word for inner and innermost which is *intimus*, the innermost character of the person.³ The inmost core of a person can be sensed introspectively by looking at Thomas Nagel’s essay entitled “What Is It Like to be a Bat?”⁴ In this essay, Nagel is at some pains to explore an alien consciousness, and carefully describes what it would be like to be a bat. But in the end he realizes that while *he* can understand what it would be like to be a bat, he could never understand what it would be for a *bat* to be a bat. Analogously, one may empathize with me very effectively and understand what I am like. But no one can understand what it is like for me to be me.⁵ This is the point of deepest intimacy, where I am

²See *Semrad: The Heart of a Therapist*, ed. Susan Rako and Harvey Mazer (New York: Aronson, 1980).

³Thomas Oden, *Game Free: The Meaning of Intimacy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

⁴Thomas Nagel, “What Is It Like to Be a Bat?” *Philosophical Review* (1974). Reprinted in Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

⁵Intimacy, as I am discussing it here, does not attempt to move into the unconscious dynamics that, to some extent, shape what it is for me to be me. Intimacy in this essay is at the core of intentional self-consciousness, not a matter of unawareness or hidden influences that, when made conscious, I may choose against because they are inconsistent with what it is for me to be me.

both most secure in myself and most fearful of letting others know me. There is a close connection between intimacy and intimidation, and that is why I am afraid to let you know who I am where it really matters to me. Why the fear? Within such an understanding of intimacy, another person could have considerable power over my life.

Popularly, what appears to break through the barriers that the ego places around this point of intimacy is the experience of sexual union. But a moment's thought makes it clear that sexual relations can actually have no intrinsic access to this hidden core of a personality. The first case I observed in my training was a couple who were getting a divorce, but they had "great sex relations." In the "oldest profession," it is well known that a person can have sexual relations while at the same time considering what to have for lunch.

At its naturalistic root, sex is nature's answer to death, and that is why it has such power. It can bring forth new physical life, but even the reproductive power of sexuality has no necessary access to the innermost person. Intimacy is far more profound than sexuality, because the violation of intimacy may well destroy the desire to live. As one of my clients, facing infidelity in her marriage said, "I could forgive a 'one night stand,' but it's the betrayal. I don't want to live anymore." Betrayal of a bond of intimacy can kill, and no renewal of sexual relations with the betrayer can undo this violence, even if it begets children.

Here the theological dimension of the issue becomes decisive. No other person can reach the intimacy of my soul, for only I know what it is for me to be me; yet this is precisely the point where I am touched by the spiritual presence of Christ. It is from this place that I may recognize with profound suddenness and lasting effect that the Spirit of Christ knows better than I do what it means for me to be me. This transformational impact of the divine Spirit thereby connects with the depth and power of my inmost being and makes me know what it means for me to be irretrievably spiritual. No matter how the controlling ego may struggle to bury or redefine this knowledge, once I am known at this level of personal depth, there are, according to my hypothesis, irreversible consequences. Once wised up at this point, there is no wising down.

The next step in the hypothesis is interpersonal intimacy. Recall the Spirit's "tongues of fire" and recognize that spiritual heat is always hotter than sexual heat. The remarkable privilege of the believer who has been transformed from the inside out in this manner is the recognition of a communion with others who have been known in a similar way by the same divine presence. Such persons are drawn into this spiritual communion by the living presence of Christ—not because they have been socialized into the same church community, but because they recognize that *koinonia* among persons comes from the initiative of Christ, which is independent of but transformationally related to institutional reality. As Paul Lehmann and T. F. Torrance say, *koinonia* is the communion-creating presence of Jesus Christ, and fundamentally has at its inception nothing to do with the socializing forces of insti-

tutional reality.⁶ In its outcome, however, the *koinonia* is the bearer of the life of God into the institutionalized community. Moreover, *koinonia* makes social relations more real and present than they could have ever been otherwise. For this discussion, it should be clear that intimacy in the Spirit of Christ not only runs deeper than any human “intimacies” but has the power to redefine them all in terms of one’s own in-depth relation to God. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that spiritual intimacy is definitive of all other versions of “intimacy,” including sexual claims to such closeness. The sex charade appears and thrives in church life as in the world because we do not know how nor do we have the theological nerve to investigate the depth of spiritual intimacy that we want in all our leaders and fellow members in the *koinonia*. Such spiritual intimacy is the most truly explosive and the most neglected force in the life and death of our church communities.

Bringing this discussion to focus on counseling, it is clear that healing can more readily take place where family and personal issues are reframed in terms of the spiritual life of clients who are facing deep conflicts. It is particularly important to see through sexual issues because of the widespread acceptance of the sexual pretense to genuine intimacy.

The classical discussion of the primacy of intimacy for the healing of human lives, broken in many different directions, is found in Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*.⁷ A person “is spirit,” he claims. Contrary to certain stereotypes, Kierkegaard’s view of the self is intensely and irreducibly relational. In his dialectical analysis, the self is constituted by a relation between finite and infinite, necessity and possibility, the temporal and the eternal. This relation between two polar aspects of the self is, however, not yet a self; the relation must become a positive third term. This relation must relate itself to itself, and by this self-relation the self is constituted as an irreducible relationality. The one condition for the dynamic balance of the self is that this high order of relationality be “grounded transparently in the power that posits it.” This dynamic interrelational view of the self describes a person as spirit, and it is by the spirit that the inmost core of the person is known (1 Cor 2:10-11). However, if this relationality is not grounded transparently in the divine presence, it will collapse or tilt and the whole bearing of the self will dissipate into despair. Despair is a disrelationship in the self due to a profound failure of intimacy with the divine presence who creates the appropriate relationality which is the self.⁸ If the human spirit is thus grounded, then it testifies with the Holy Spirit that a person is a child of God (Rom 8:16).

⁶Paul Lehmann, *Ethics in a Christian Context* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); T. F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988).

⁷See Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), especially the first five paragraphs (pp. 13-14). This section is taken to be the key to all Kierkegaard’s writings on human nature by Arnold Come, *Kierkegaard as Humanist* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1995).

⁸An analogy from the physical sciences may help explain how a relationality takes on a life of its own. When James Clerk Maxwell discovered the electromagnetic field and formulated it mathematically, he recognized that the

Interpersonally, this highly kinetic view of relationality in the individual self is analogous to the koinonia relationality among persons in Christ, as provided by the divine presence. The ultimate form of such relationality is the Holy Trinity, where the relationality is the unity of the Trinity, as the early Cappadocians thought. From the relationality that constructs the individual before God to that which creates koinonia, to the inner life of the Trinity, the divine presence establishes the definitive reality of the Christian life as irreducibly relational.

I am using intimacy with the divine presence in the same way that Kierkegaard uses transparency, but with the term intimacy I am attempting to put more flesh on the relationality that Kierkegaard described dialectically. Thus I am attempting to argue that the deep power of this Spirit-to-spirit intimacy to move persons into the world to “do the works of love,” as Kierkegaard put it, should be the most profound focus of our attention in counseling. We should not allow any surrogate concerns to conceal it. As I said above, the sexual pretense to genuine intimacy is the chief deceitful influence in bringing persons into a state of Kierkegaardian despair.

Finally, as a test case I will focus on an explicitly complex and critical issue, homosexuality. What follows is a careful descriptive account, but it does not attempt in this essay to take up the wide-ranging ethical issues it raises. However, an ethical discourse on this topic that ignores the following discussion will very likely be mistaken. To begin, the position developed here claims that there is no such thing as a homosexual. There are only people who have this resolution to the sexual aspect of their identity. In the course of counseling, I have worked with some persons to help them come to an acceptance of their homosexual feelings and with others to help them change their lifestyle. What I discovered, in my counseling experience, was that those who continued to practice homosexuality were not truly content even after accepting the practice. They continued in despair, though it was pushed down deeper. Later in my practice, I realized that helping them to accept this condition was not doing them a favor, and I had to take it up from a more profoundly spiritual standpoint. Whatever permits Spirit-to-spirit intimacy liberates the human spirit for a dynamic relationality in which sexuality is reshaped and integrated into a self that is constituted by the divine presence.*

The crux of the issue came home for me when I worked with a young man who wanted to move beyond his homosexuality, and he was also a charismatic

relationality between electricity and magnetism took on a life of its own. Lord Kelvin thought Maxwell had lapsed into mysticism, but the electromagnetic field became the foundation for Einstein’s theory of special relativity. What operates at the physical level of creation is replicated in the human personality and in other close relations such as marriage. In the latter, one comes to “think married” when the relationality has a life of its own through the spiritual presence of Christ.

*Editor’s note: *Word & World* has commissioned articles to explore different sides of the controversial issue of the reversibility of homosexuality or homosexual behavior through therapy or prayer. These will appear in the Face to Face feature of a subsequent issue.

Christian. When I asked him if he practiced charismatic prayer when he was with his partner, he said no. In effect, these were two separate categories in his life, walled off from each other. I told him to bring them together next time he was with his friend, and he said he would do so. Afterward he told me that he lost interest in homosexuality when he made that move. I might have thought this was just an isolated incident, but one published study collaborates this position and makes my point more concretely. Eleven men, it reported, changed their sexual orientation from exclusive homosexuality to exclusive heterosexuality through participation in a Pentecostal church fellowship. The importance of ideology, expectations, and behavioral experience was noted. Cognitive change appeared first, then behavioral change, and finally intrapsychic reorientation. Thus, even when homosexual behavior was transposed into a personal identity, a change was not thereby inhibited.⁹

What is at issue here is the way in which sexuality generally, homosexuality in particular, is a deficient surrogate for a deeper longing that only the spiritual life can provide. Only in this context can one be thoroughly known in a biblical sense by another. The fear and power of this, I believe, can be recognized and appropriated only as a gift of the Spirit lived out in *koinonia*, the “context of conscience” (Lehmann).

Thus, my hypothesis, stated in theological terms that can be reduced to empirical studies, is that the intensity of charismatic prayer¹⁰ releases the power of the spiritual life, a power that has the capacity to reorganize a personality in keeping with the relational image of God. In particular, through charismatic prayer disrelational patterns of sexual behavior may be brought into line with the relational integrity of the self; those not in line are nullified. Homosexual relations are an extreme example, but other forms of disrelationship in sexual intimacy are likewise nullified. This is clearly not a case against all sexual relations, but sexuality is at best a derivative form of interpersonal closeness and needs to be redefined across the board according to the spiritual relationality of persons, community, and the Trinity. In counseling, this means helping persons to move into the depth of the intimacy of charismatic prayer in relation to the disrelations of the self, including sexual practices.

Another Semrad saying is, “I’ve always thought some of the things people suffer most from are the things they tell themselves are not true.” Arguments about the biblical prohibitions against homosexuality are a displacement out of fear of the ultimate intimacy. Given the fact that there is no antecedent exception to the prohibition of homosexuality anywhere in Scripture, disputes about this issue miss the point. The prohibition will not disappear, but the more profound issue is why is the prohibition there? The answer comes, I believe, from the foregoing discus-

⁹E. Mansell Pattison and Myrna Loy Pattison, “Ex-Gays: Religiously Mediated Changes in Homosexuals,” *American Journal of Psychiatry* 137/12 (1980) 1553-1562.

¹⁰By charismatic prayer, I refer to prayers that arise from the spirit-to-Spirit relationships, “praying in the Spirit.” I do not refer to all kinds of prayer that may appear in a Pentecostal meeting. For an example of this, refer to James E. Loder, *The Logic of the Spirit* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998) ch. 3, “The Case of Helen.”

sion where it is evident that in his love, God yearns over the spirit he has put in us. What displaces his love and his desire for intimacy at the very core of one's being brings despair and a "sickness unto death." The prohibition in God's word is the urgent longing in God for an intimacy with his people that supersedes and displaces all others. In a theological turn on Semrad's comment, outside of this perspective persons will suffer because they tell themselves that it is not true that God has this longing for us. The spiritual force of this claim is movingly put by Calvin:

Christ is not without us, but dwells within us; and not only adheres to us by an indissoluble connection of fellowship, but by a certain wonderful communion coalesces more and more into one body with us, till he becomes altogether one with us.¹¹ ⊕

¹¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 7th American edition (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Christian Education, 1936) book III, ch. 2, sec. 24.