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Recovering our “Elemental Wild Spirit”

The creative person always walks two steps into the darkness. That’s where you discover “other things,” the things that defy description. —Benny Golson, jazz musician and composer

“We are vessels for the life force.” These are the words that struck me so powerfully as I listened to Tara Brach (a psychologist, author, and founder of the Insight Meditation Community in Washington, DC), speak at a large convention for psychotherapists. This was not the first time I had heard such an idea, but something this time struck me in a new way. There was an implication that I hadn’t quite appreciated before: I was the carrier of something precious, and therefore that my whole being, including my body, was a container of an energetic, life-giving power.

Soon after, I began to contemplate how this life-force energy doesn’t belong to us. It comes through us—in fact, we are “the sons and daughters of Life’s longing for itself,” as Kahlil Gibran put it (7). Of course, Freud spoke of libido as psychic energy or the life instinct that compels us to have sex. Modern-day sexologists, as well as Tantra and Taoist sexuality practitioners also refer to eros energy.

However, until I heard the word vessel, I was unable to shake my aversion to the mechanical “tension and release” model that the word energy conjured, and that often-framed traditional body psychotherapy. Now I felt differently. I was no longer concerned with what animates us, but what I could do to help my clients tune into themselves to connect to this universal turn-on.

When I approached eros in this way, I soon realized that we are not—and cannot—direct eros. Sexual enrichment interventions that emphasize outside-in maneuvers and techniques rely on the application of a certain level of willfulness to direct sexual “energy.” In contrast, I began to appreciate that an inside-out approach saw “good sex” as more about sensing and responding to the eros energy in an organic, improvisational way; that is, rather than trying to direct eros, we must learn to follow it. As a result, being present is what enlivens passion and pleasure.

Erotic attunement connects us to ourselves and to eros energy in the pursuit of sexual pleasure. If we can imagine ourselves as a vessel for eros, we might feel less shame around expressing our fundamental aliveness in whole-body ways. We might also experience less performance pressure and goal orientation. Eros energy is the music, and we are the dancer animated by the music within.

Reconnecting to—or discovering—this ability to tune into the animating force of our erotic energy is entirely possible. However, for most people, it usually takes some practice, since many of us have become wedded to the performance mind-set. You may recall that a performance mind-set is fused with the cultural imperative to excel at everything we do, including sex.

Mindful sex, like mindfulness practice, is not goal focused; it is present focused. Therefore, on the naked path, we must be aware of and willing to drop our performance mind-set and the habits it leads to when it comes to sex. We can no more attain “perfect” sex than “perfect” meditation. To the contrary, mindful sex is allowing a far-from-perfect performance.

K. Anders Ericsson, a professor at the University of Florida, tells a story about how competitive ice skaters develop mastery but look awful in the process—with lessons we can apply in our approach to sex. In practice sessions, these skaters look terrible because they are always trying something new. In contrast, skaters that perform professionally but are not training for competition, look polished because they repeat the same routines over and over.

Ericsson stresses that mastery is more than a result of time and repetition: we do not become experts by repeating something for 10,000 hours. Repetition leads to automaticity rather than excellence in skaters, as well as musicians, cardiologists, and any other group. The research suggests that we become masterful only by going to our edge and meeting uncertainty, not by repeating the same moves each time.

Unfortunately, like professional skaters, many of us focus on how we look, trying to get our moves just right when we have sex. We stay within tight lines, safeguarding ourselves from appearing foolish or stepping on each other’s toes. This form of “safe sex” only deadens eros. We end up exiling the wild, messy, and exploratory parts of ourselves that help us discover “other things.”

As Welwood says, we can fully appreciate the “transformative quality” of sex, only when “we connect with our elemental wild spirit, which is forever unfathomable to the rational mind.” From the perspective of eros, good lovers do best when they do less thinking and planning about sex, and let their bodies move in response to the energy unfolding between them. In this “wild” approach, everything, including “mistakes,” becomes part of the dance.

Sadly, it is all too easy to be in our heads about what great sex should look like, or used to look like, or to struggle with ideas that create anxiety around performance. However, if we approach sex through our template of a “good performance,” we are at risk of turning into the pretty looking skaters who do the same routine over and over.

While humans, as living systems, rely on internal models as guideposts, mindful sex involves going into the dark without the expectation—and the pressure—of perfect performance. We have to feel into our eros energy and be present enough to notice signals from our partner that tell us to move faster or slower, lick or pinch.

Improvisation is a practice in itself. We can be wildly experimental only if we agree there are no mistakes. In this approach, nothing is a problem, and to be rejected as “wrong.” For example, I once took a salsa workshop with an instructor who demonstrated the art of “falling.” Instead of sloughing off the potentially embarrassing moment that can happen to any salsa dancer, she showed us how to incorporate it into the dance itself. The “mistake” of falling became hot, graceful, and connecting.

Improv artists do the same thing, especially when working with another person or in a group. They always join with what is there in the moment and then, take it a step further. Instead of digging in, or working at cross-purposes with others, they stay light on their feet. They move in response to what is emerging in the now.

Stage 3 couples also assume this readiness to “join with” each other. With erotic attunement, they stay in touch with eros energy and allow that energy to guide them from the inside-out. If one of them falls, as in becoming automatic or not hearing the music, they pause, adjust, and decide whether to continue the dance.