CHILDHOOD, SEXUALITY AND BODYLINESS

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HOW DO CHILDREN VIEW THEIR BODIES and their sexuality in relation to God?

Could there be a parallel between the creation myth and the development of sexuality in human beings?

What are the concepts and language which children use to cope with sexual issues?

As they move through their developmental stages, how do children hear the voice of God in both their sensual and spiritual experience?

What are the spiritual resources which are available to parents and children to protect themselves in an intrusively erotic environment?

In this piece I examine these questions in the light of two sources. The first is the familiar one of Jungian insights into the role of fairy tales in the collective unconscious. The second is the less familiar one of the biblical stories which describe the relationship of the Covenant taken as a metaphor for child development.

The creation myth – and its personal parallel

In one exquisitely beautiful sentence the story of Adam and Eve expresses perfect intimate union with God in Paradise: they 'heard the sound of Yahweh God walking in the garden in the cool of the day' (Gen 3:8). The image is one of peace and familiarity, of an environment in which Creator and creature are together and at ease. It is an image of symbiosis in which Adam is at one with the soil from which he was fashioned and Eve is the total companion. In Rodin's sculpture of the *Hand of God*, Adam and Eve are intertwined as they emerge from the *prima materia* at the moment of creation. And all of these images of being 'at one' climax in the verse: 'This is why a man leaves his father and mother and becomes attached to his wife, and they become one flesh' (Gen 2:24).

Out of the state of perfect union with the Creator, moving through to perfect homeostasis with the environment, the whole symbiotic scene is crowned and mirrored by 'man and woman becoming one flesh'. The picture is one of a totally subjective universe, characterized by oneness of experience and purpose. By 'subjective universe' I mean that

'everything is me'. There is no opposition between internal and external reality. The union between God, the world, and man and woman gave an 'inside' knowledge of all aspects of reality. There was no distinction between subject and object.

For all that we might long for union with God, in wisdom God has given us a universe which is marvellously characterized by diversity, and the myth helps us to grieve for 'paradise lost' and tolerate the pain of separation. Psychologists took centuries to transform the simple mythical beauty of Adam and Eve into the 'scientific myth' of human emotional development.

Mother and baby intimacy

In the early weeks after childbirth, the intimacy of the uterus persists for both mother and her baby. For the mother, it is as if the child's cries are heard inside her; she is not in a position to decide rationally whether or not to respond. It is as though the baby's cries happen in the mother's belly, and she is as powerfully drawn to respond as she would be to the meeting of her own need. And just as the mother is totally connected to the baby, so the baby is tied to its mother's emotional world; sometimes it is the baby who knows first that mother is stressed and tired. Each of them has inside knowledge of the other, and can as easily be emotional on behalf of the other as on their own behalf. All feelings are in common, with no means of knowing where they originate, and are equally intense, regardless of whom they belong to.

This is a sort of emotional paradise! Total intimacy – all my feelings are known to you without my having to explain or verbalize them; all your needs are my needs; we think alike, we respond in unison; you can anticipate my feelings; we fulfil one another's needs – I want to be a caring nurturing mother, you want to be cared for and nurtured. We form a perfect symbiosis. We are deeply involved with one another and barely touched by the outside world. We gaze at one another, and as your mother, my gaze mirrors your soul.

In this fused state (which ideally should only last for a very short time) all communication is non-verbal. Mother and baby are synchronous in the rise and fall of their mutual arousal and quieting, using physical and sensual contact to gratify each other in their 'emotional conversations'. Both can say all they need to say in a language of emotion and touch. Such is the intensity and power of this early experience that it acts as our blueprint throughout adulthood as we search for the 'paradise lost' of intimacy. Once again we have described a 'subjective universe': reality for both mother and baby is

known from the inside, and there is nothing beyond their mutual cradling.

The first-time-mother is taken unawares by the fierce nature of her connection with her baby. She may also find that the sheer earthiness of childbirth comes as a shock. Never before will she have nonchalantly lain back, legs akimbo, and chatted to a nurse stitching her back together and mopping her up, unselfconscious in the bliss of beholding the minutes-old child.

> I see you with my eyes
> I see you in glory.
> From a tatter of flesh I watch them work.
> From a pinnacle of joy.
>
> In a haze of peace they cut and stitch
> my threaded body like scarlet linen
> the midwife chatting comfortably
> seated at her work, the needle threaded
> the thimble, the green thread
> in and out, in and out.[1]

Having become a more earthy person in childbirth than she may ever have imagined, the mother then rapidly learns to be deeply interested in her baby's processes of elimination: the frequency, the colour and texture, the smell, and the technologies of cleansing and moisturizing, as well as paying meticulous attention to the state of the skin. The new mother gets to know her baby's bottom almost before she becomes acquainted with the rest of him or her. She learns the smells and sounds and, above all, the touch of the person whose emotional world she already knows from the inside. The poet Galway Kinnell likens the tactile knowing of a newborn to the creation of the earthy world:

> When he came wholly forth
> I took him up in my hands and bent
> over and smelled
> the black glistening fur
> of his head, as empty space
> must have bent
> over the newborn planet
> and smelled the grasslands and the ferns.[2]

The physical and emotional intimacy which we experienced at this early stage of our lives remains our strongest and most nostalgic

memory of union. The sensuality of the relationship in which each has physical contact with the other for most of the day and night is the quality which stays with us – the stroking and holding, and the rhythm of desire and satisfaction.

The intimacy of symbiosis is essential to the child's well-being, but stifling if it persists. Neither mother nor baby can develop if they remain in a mutually imprisoning state of enmeshment. From the moment that the mother fails to respond promptly to a demand, the baby is faced with the need to make sense of being ignored and frustrated. In the infantile perception there is all or nothing: either the world is full and bounded by a warm loving mother, or there is a vacuum, anarchy and chaos. The rage of a baby kept waiting is a sight to behold; adults find the insistence of a child's demands hard to ignore. This is because evolution has built in a mechanism whereby the huge dependence of the human infant is safeguarded for survival. But the best of mothers finds it impossible to respond promptly all the time; life intervenes with other priorities. So the baby must somehow cope with 'abandonment'!

Mother and baby begin to differentiate

Just as symbiotic closeness brought an emotional and sensual means of communication, so separation brings a sense of physical annihilation – that sense of a sudden and catastrophic fall as if dropped from a great height, so often rehearsed in dreams.

As the baby begins to experience the mother as the 'other' (somebody who does not synchronize with thoughts and feelings, who is different and has the capacity to respond or not) the baby moves from the all-embracing intimacy of the subjective universe to experiences of frustration, anger, loneliness, sadness and bewilderment. Mothers and babies 'play' the experience in the hide-and-seek games; the baby's face is a picture of puzzlement and loss when her face disappears, and is then transformed into joy as she reappears. 'Otherness' introduces the possibility of unmet needs, of unfulfilled desires, of misunderstandings, of bad moods and different priorities, of longing and sadness – in biblical shorthand, sin. The negative, shadow dimension of life enters with the oppositional subject–object relationship. As this happens, the gaze of the 'other' introduces the possibility of shame. Whereas the symbiosis of the original intimacy luxuriated in the sensual, there is now self-conscious awareness brought about by the possibility of mistrust. When we were both contained in the 'emotional vessel' we did not 'see' one another as separate entities. We simply experienced a

shared closeness. Now we see and are seen. The Genesis myth images shame as a fig-leaf covering the genitals. Psychoanalysis has made use of the myth of Narcissus to describe the transition from the subjective to the objective universe. By 'seeing' himself in the pool, Narcissus developed an observing 'other' and shame became a possibility.

The Genesis myth tells us that the glorious physicality of union divides into an anxious duality, as God and his creation (or mother and baby in the personal version of the story) differentiate and explore their separate paths. Some needs are not met by the other (specifically the need to be self-determining), and this is what drives them to tolerate separation and move into a less than idyllic world in which bodyliness becomes associated with shame and inhibition.

What is the language which children use to cope with sexual issues?

At this point we have begun to describe the presence of the shadow side of 'sexuality and bodyliness' to try to grasp how it comes about that children should feel troubled by their sexuality. Otherwise, why should children need to find a source of reassurance or a language to help understand the incomprehensible? By bringing together the story of the Fall with the child's differentiation from its mother, we can tease out how the physicality of early intimacy becomes a shame-based sexuality for the child, and how the power of mythology can speak to the child's repressed sensuality.

Genesis tells us that the man slept as his rib was taken and became woman. In Jungian terms this represents a descent into the shadow world of the unconscious. The female dimension of the psyche, the Anima, is a familiar of the underworld where it is dark and wet. In his or her growing awareness of the shadow, the child enters this world by means of dreams and fantasies. As the child imagines and plays, he or she begins the complex task of making a bridge between all-embracing, satisfying intimacy, and the self-directed, separated existence of individuation. Winnicott,[3] the child psychologist, described how the child develops creative play to link the internal and external world. It is a link that is achieved by means of fantasy. The 'transitional object' is one aspect of this fantasy activity: a teddy or a precious blanket becomes a symbolic icon of mother, invested with 'mother power' so that it can conjure her presence and the strength of her caring in the midst of a lonely period of longing. Babies stroke their security blanket with a sensuous devotion which evokes the tactile intensity of the symbiotic phase. They use it as a talisman to help them through the 'dark times' when they feel lost and abandoned. The memory of the

physicality of closeness is transformed into the sensuality of the soft furry object, and the child may stroke its hair or cheek or suck a thumb to expand the tactile experience. The child is learning to self-comfort, and in so doing begins to discover that bodyliness brings with it self-pleasuring. Winnicott notes that:

> Of the transitional object it can be said that it is a matter of agreement between us and the baby that we will never ask the question: 'Did you conceive of this or was it presented to you from without?' The important point is that no decision on this point is expected. The question is not to be formulated.[4]

The linking of internal experience to the outside world is therefore made by use of the symbolic, translated into a form of communication by the use of the creative imagination. The child's innate sense of the rightness of the object is unquestioned and respected. Similarly, the child must develop his or her symbols in the form of play, so that internal reality can be objectified in the new situation where feelings and needs are no longer known about at source.

In the archetypal language of the fairy story, the child is given access to a symbolic understanding of its sensuality – both the agony and the ecstasy – sensual pleasure as well as the sad loss of a constant physical and tactile companion. Archetypes are the images which convey the 'ultimate nature of things' in the collective unconscious, transmitted in the themes which reappear in story form throughout the history of humanity. When Jung constructed a psychology centred on the importance of myth, he took story-telling out of the realm of the literal and personal into the domain of the shared experience of the ancestors. We would be unwise to underestimate the transforming power of the image in mythical form. Joseph Campbell, the scholar of mythology, has observed in his television series *The power of myth*: 'Our thinking is largely discursive, verbal, linear, yet there is more reality in an image than in a word'.[5]

The psychotherapeutic use of fairy tales is well developed, and is founded on the principle that the oral tradition of story-telling for children gave them a symbolic language in which they could tackle all the immense difficulties of the child's experiential world. The pre-conscious child remains primarily receptive to non-rational concepts. This means that, for the child, symbolism can carry the weight of emotional, sensual and relationship issues – in particular if adults can bear to leave the symbolic uninterpreted. The temptation to tell a child what a story 'means' may be overwhelming to an anxious adult who

wants to make sure that all pain finds an easy resolution in the child's thinking. But children can easily spot phoney reassurance! Rational explanation is a less respectful approach than that of the fairy tale which can tackle the knottiest of problems by staying at the level of image and symbol.

The 'animal-groom' cycle of stories are those in which a princess is approached by a 'disgusting' animal, such as a slimy frog or some kind of a beast. The unlikely suitor (who represents earthy and anxiety-provoking sexuality) is transformed by the princess's devoted love into a worthy partner. It is thought that the child's sex education is conducted at a very young age by turning sexual taboo and social repression into an imaginal monster so that the child's worries become tolerable by being safely projected onto the creature.

Sex education tells a child how his or her sexuality works, and that it is good and beautiful and God-given. At a profound level the child knows that human beings are, in fact, much more confused and ambivalent than that. The child's own earliest experience of physical intimacy with its mother became one of separation, in which sexuality needed to be held and nurtured alone until the day when maturity would bless it with another opportunity for intimate connecting. The fairy tale agrees with the child's latent sense that its sexuality resides in a forbidden locked chamber (Bluebeard) or in a dormant glass coffin (Sleeping Beauty) or in a golden ball at the bottom of a well (The Frog King). In Little Red Riding Hood, the child learns that there is a well-known road beyond the parental home, from which she must not stray. Wearing the colour red (symbolizing violent emotion and sexuality), Little Red Riding Hood discovers that wolves are both attractive and dangerous.

> Little Red Cap is universally loved because, although she is virtuous, she is tempted; and because her fate tells us that trusting everybody's good intentions, which seems so nice, is really leaving oneself open to pitfalls. If there were not something in us that likes the big bad wolf, he would have no power over us. Therefore, it is important to understand his nature, but even more important to learn what makes him attractive to us. Appealing as naivete is, it is dangerous to remain naive all one's life.[6]

The pinnacle of the animal-groom stories is Beauty and the Beast. Here the child's worst oedipal fears are resolved by Beauty's ability to mature from the love of her father to a satisfying sexual relationship with her lover. She achieves this by means of a transitional period of

time spent getting to know 'the Beast' and allowing for the timely development of physical intimacy.[7]

Fairy stories tell the child about the worry and the pacing of emerging sexuality in great depth, and without shirking any of the complexity of the child's fascination laced with fear. The fairy story is the medium through which adults have always known how to communicate to a child who is pre-pubertal, and who would be disturbed by 'too much reality'.

How do children hear the voice of God in both their bodyliness and their spirituality?

In his beautiful book, *Mutative metaphors*,[8] Murray Cox (a psychiatrist at Broadmoor) has defined the word *poesis* as 'calling something into existence that was not there before' (p 23). We have already thought about the way in which creative play bridges the gap between subjective and objective reality, and how the symbolic in the form of story-telling can translate profound human concerns into tolerable concepts. St Paul refers to the God of Abraham 'calling into existence what does not yet exist' (Rom 4:17). The *poesis* of the Bible has the active power to speak to the creativity of the child's unconscious, far more so than fairy tales. It may be that children can hear at this level better than adults, who are less likely to have the ability to speak the language of symbols. To give troublesome sexuality poetic expression is to sing it and dance it and paint it and sculpt it and act it dramatically. Poetic forms take the unspoken and speak it; that which was not there before is brought into existence.

In the language of the Scriptures, what does God say to the child about his or her sexuality and bodyliness? We are nurtured with images of the original paradise of closeness between humanity and God, a closeness paralleled in the physical contact of mother and baby. The painful loss of the original closeness leaves us with a sense of longing and nostalgia. The people of God consoled themselves in their loss with the beauty of the Psalms:

> As the deer yearns
> for running streams,
> so I yearn
> for you, my God.
> (Ps 42:1)

They expressed the closest possible symbiosis:

> You created my inmost self,
> knit me together in my mother's womb.
> . . . You knew me through and through,
> my being held no secrets from you
> when I was being formed in secret,
> textured in the depths of the earth.
> (Ps 139:13–15)

We are familiar with the way in which Scripture celebrates the closeness of the divine relationship, but how does the Bible image the shadow aspect of sexuality?

In the story of Noah, sexuality is symbolized by the animals who are shut in the Ark:

> One pair of all that was alive and had the breath of life boarded the ark with Noah, and those that went aboard were a male and female of all that was alive, as God had commanded him. Then Yahweh shut him in. (Gen 7:15–16)

These representatives of our animal nature, of both genders, were repressed in the unconscious until the time was right for them to emerge and glorify God. Their ability to reproduce was kept safe, and although the unconscious was a dark and wet place, they were not flooded. In the fullness of time God gave them a symbol for the integration of light and wet – the bow in the clouds – to signify relationship. The story is such a beautiful parable for the growth of physical intimacy, through a transitional phase of separation and shadow, culminating in sexual maturity in relationship.

The 'shadow' aspect of separation is recounted in the history of the people of Israel, moving through exile towards the land flowing with milk and honey – a deeply sensual image of the symbiotic future in the heavenly Jerusalem. The Scriptures are the richest source of symbols with which to move fluidly between levels of understanding – from the creation myth, to psychological theories of emotional development, to the history of the people of God learning to live with the implications of the Covenant, to integrity in sexual maturation, to social justice which is respectful and nurturing of sexuality in a responsible context. Adults and children both resonate to pre-verbal messages contained in the symbolic.

In answer to the question 'How do children view sexuality and bodyliness in relation to God?' I guess we would need to say that we do not know. Children and adults speak a very different language, and we

are still trying to learn to listen to them. However, I do think that children 'know' at a level of themselves that is experiential and symbolic. They know something of the intensity of sensual intimacy, and they know that such intimacy cools down and becomes something which they must hold in primal memory; they know that there are images and words around them which they find disturbing. If they are exposed to the archetypal poetics of story-telling they will be enabled to chart themselves a course through some uncharted waters, and if adults can sufficiently help them to disengage from the sordid aspects of their culture, children can be given the immense gift of the biblically symbolic.

NOTES

[1] Jeni Couzyn, 'Transformation', *Life by drowning: selected poems* (Bloodaxe Books Ltd, 1983).
[2] Galway Kinnell, 'Lastness' (Part 2), *The book of nightmares* (Houghton Mifflin Co., 1971).
[3] D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and reality* (Penguin, 1971).
[4] Winnicott, *op. cit.*
[5] Joseph Campbell, *The power of myth* (Mystic Fire Video).
[6] Bruno Bettelheim, *The uses of enchantment* (Penguin, 1975).
[7] *Ibid.*
[8] Murray Cox and Alice Theilgaard, *Mutative metaphors in psychotherapy: the Aeolian mode* (Methuen, 1987).