

Sex and Relationship Talk

I had a fantasy one day while having a bath. It wasn't a sexual fantasy - I don't generally have sexual fantasies in the bath. It was a fantasy about giving a sex talk in a school, or to a bunch of schoolkids. And here is what I would say.

(April 2013 - Oh dear! I did this 3 or 4 years ago. Reads naïve I'm sure you'll find, even for then. I add a piece at the end).

My Talk

Sex is about having children; it is about love; and it is about pleasure.

We have a brief speck of time and space in this universe, which seems a strange and wonderful mystery. Our awareness of that time and space, the fact that we have an experience of knowing: that is also a wonderful mystery.

I give this talk in the context of this awareness and in the context also of wonder at it.

And I give this talk also in the context of the evolution of ourselves as human beings over many thousands, many hundreds of thousands, of generations. And this evolution, which depends on having offspring, in the system of belief which I hold - this evolution has led to the nature of sex, and to love as a part of it, and to pleasure as a part of it.

So: children; love; and pleasure.

We need children to pass on the nature of our being, and over these many generations, to evolve. We need love to bring joy and togetherness to the parenting of children and to the caring of them. And we need pleasure to give the act of procreating, and to give the act of togetherness, a special quality of joyful inspiration.

These are the evolutionary aspects of sex in the view that I am putting forward. A very broad context.

But there is a more immediate context. Which is why we are here today.

When these three features, children, love and pleasure, come together, that is great. That is, we could say, best.

However, they are often not combined. I am not making a negative judgement here, I'm not evaluating it negatively. But it has to be seen.

And, we need to recognise some of the consequences.

There are two obvious outcomes that we want to avoid in sexual connection. One is unwanted pregnancy. The other is infectious disease. But there is a third outcome to be avoided.

I say 'But' because it is often not central in our thoughts, and I believe it should be more so. This outcome is to do with the fact that sex is a very powerful force. I am talking now about emotion. Sex can lead to a powerful emotional effect that was not foreseen or intended.

So I am now going to say what I could have said at the start. It is a starting point in a way. It is this.

There are three reasons not to have sex.

First, to avoid unwanted pregnancy. Second to avoid infection. And third, to avoid an unexpected, or powerful, emotional effect. And since the first two of these can, with care, be avoided, it is the third that I want to put forward as the most important to look at.

Sex is not to be taken, or undertaken, lightly. It is a serious matter. Even when it is pleasurable.

It is often said 'don't do it until you are ready' - or some such phrase. But what does ready mean? When are you ready? What makes you ready?

Certainly not the knowledge that some of your friends are having sex.

I believe that each person needs to work out for themselves, needs to discover, needs to really believe, while at the same time exerting a proper doubt, that they are ready. Having said that, I would assert that being ready means knowing that this is something really special, that you could imagine being really committed to this person, that you have imagined what it would be like having deep and serious experiences with him or with her, that you could imagine even what it would be like having a child - but that you refrain, you defer, perhaps you stay just close friends, until you really are certain.

(cont'd)

And that is just the start. Because then you need to know the other person, know what she wants or he wants, and what he doesn't want and what she doesn't want.

How to give pleasure: how giving pleasure is a way to have pleasure: how it can at times be the best way: how certainly it is an essential part of relationship. There is an additional aspect of pleasure to remember: the male source of genital pleasure is on the outside of the body; the female source is on the inside. This means it is more difficult for the man (the boy) to discover, understand, create pleasure in the woman (the girl) than the other way.

How to agree to do what both people want; and *not* to do what either person doesn't want. That's the sort of agreement, or 'contract', that I am suggesting you make.

And so it is not just to do with you, one person, being ready: but with you and you, a relationship, being ready.

This talk, the context of this talk, is called sex and relationship education, and this is certainly the right way to think about it. It is through relating, through discovering, through empathising, through expressing, through listening, that we build the kind of connection that will be special. The kind of relationship that will justify difficulties and will bring about that growth in each of the two people in it that makes them better, more fulfilled, more aware, more understanding, and also stronger, people. The kind of relationship that helps each person to grow as themselves, not just as one of a couple.

Some of this process of discovery will be through contact, through doing things together, through communicating. Some of it will be mental, in the broadest sense - a meeting of minds. Some of it will be physical, in the narrower sense perhaps, of discovering what gives pleasure, in activities other than sex as well as in sex.

Some of this process may lead to the discovery that this is not right for you two people at this time. That also needs to be expressed and listened to, in oneself and in the other person.

What we are doing here is called Sex and Relationship Education. And the relationship part of it is very essential. You could say it's primary. What happens in sexual attraction or connection is part of how people relate to each other, and the way sex is expressed is a part of the expression of a person. You could say sex *is* relationship - even when it's only exploration or a one-night stand. Sex without relationship is not going to be good sex.

I'm going to finish with this rather banal but important phrase: If in doubt, don't. Ok, that's a bit of a slogan. But a useful one I think.

Stay friends. Friendship is a great thing. Friendship, mutual regard, feelings about the other person - all are great. They remain great, with sex there while not engaged in. If in doubt, stay with that. It has its own rewards.

I hope this has been, and will be, valuable. Do please ask any questions, or make any comments.

(With original article -) Of course, there is a big issue with all this. I speak from a humanist position. A religious perspective, from whichever religion, is likely to provide a different view, maybe radically so where pleasure, especially for the female, is concerned. This is a problem in our multicultural society. I do not know the solution, in the context of sex education. I try to explore a humanist position in general in 'Tough Humanism' in the section Destination.

March 2013 - Well, *I think it was three or four years ago I wrote this ... Not too bad for its time maybe but ... One thing I like about it is that it clearly and definitely connects sex with relating. And that each person needs to get in touch with herself or himself, separately as well as relating.*

How to engage in this, what are the issues? Below is how I've come to look at it. No longer bath-work or free-wheeling fantasy! I've kept the original article as I do think bath-fantasy-work can be valuable, and I rather like it as a record. But I am trying to do some hard thinking now. So.

There is the curriculum.

There are different value-systems - and parents differ in what they want.

There is pornography which has become easily accessible on the internet.

There is masturbation.

There is touching of sexually sensitive parts.

There is pressure and oppression.

And there is the issue of variety and exploration.

First, then, **the curriculum**. I find it quite difficult to disentangle.

Here is my understanding. There is a 'National Curriculum', for schools with any sort of state funding - however, certain categories of school do not have to follow it, thus Free Schools and Academies can write their own. And: the national curriculum itself places sex education within a 'science' framework. This covers the basic physical process of reproduction and puberty, also preventing pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection.

Then there is the broader aspect of 'Sex and Relationships Education' - not compulsory, but 'recommended' that school governors give 'due regard' to guidance in this area.

Effectively, this means that anything to do with the developing of a relationship, of the boundaries of sex within this and how they can be negotiated, of how empathetic and co-operative communication between two people who are attracted to each other (or just aroused by physical proximity) can be learned or carried out in practice, of how to explore physical touching or refrain from it while being aware - within the curriculum none of this needs to be addressed. Parents also have the right to withdraw a pupil from any such sex education.

Second, **different value-systems**. Obviously there's a connection here.

Some parents, or perhaps religious groups or ethnic communities, I would expect to have views such as wanting total abstinence before marriage, or the suppression of any discussion to do with sexual pleasure, or the dismissal of birth-control methods or indeed the use of a condom as a disease-protecting barrier.

Some (many?) parents probably find it difficult to have discussion with their children about sex. Indeed, I would have to say that some parents have a difficult relationship with each other and difficulty in talking about sex with each other. The broad range of 'multi-cultural' views would seem to make this whole area really hard to navigate. Perhaps there is a case for sex-education for parents!

In any event, it is clear that one kind of sex-education for all children must be virtually impossible to design.

There is also the subject (non-statutory) known now as 'Personal, Social and Health Education' (PSHE), which is more geared towards relating and how to negotiate its difficulties in the physical and relationship areas, including oppressive behaviour. The most extreme issue would be female genital mutilation, with forced marriage not far behind. The whole issue of values in our multi-cultural society is of course difficult. I try to begin to tackle it in the article 'Tough Humanism', in the section Destination.

Third, **pornography**. I am amazed how easy it is to get on to a porn site on the internet. And many parents simply won't know how to filter out this kind of material, their kids today will be much more computer-savvy than them, and many have their own laptops.

The presence of pornography, and its nature, have to be acknowledged, and need to be addressed in sex education. It is obviously a bad model for sex: it is a performance and it is paid work - even though sometimes the people doing it may be genuinely engaged (some may just be very good actors).

However, interestingly, and one could say paradoxically, while I am not for a moment suggesting porn be used as a method of education, nonetheless I think there is something to be learnt about what excites a woman physically from watching women masturbate or having sex with each other. And this might help a boy (or a man!) to be able to give a woman what she wants.

Fourth, **masturbation**. Not many generations back, masturbation was forbidden territory. It was said to cause blindness, infertility, memory loss, impotence, epilepsy and other ailments.

In our society, especially following the work of Kinsey, the prevailing view is very different. It is recognised that most people masturbate from an early age, even that it can have benefits. A few years ago the NHS in Sheffield brought out a leaflet called 'Pleasure', which suggested that masturbating twice a week might actually be healthy - also that it was a way of exploring what was sexually enjoyable and that it might even delay young people giving up their virginity until they felt really ready. I think this leaflet is still available - it's part of a wide-ranging education programme, designed not for pupils but for teachers, by the Centre for HIV and Sexual Health (see <www.sexualhealthsheffield.nhs.uk>). Of course here again, there is a cultural difficulty - some religions and some ethnic groups would oppose self-stimulation.

Fifth, in considering the touching of **sexually sensitive parts**, there is an interesting inherent difference between the two genders. Boys carry their pleasure areas mainly on the outside of the body, while girls mainly on the inside. It is therefore much easier to find out what pleases a boy than what pleases a girl. I do mention this in my 'Talk', but it needs to be given a lot of space, I think, in relation to the whole issue of pleasure.

And there is a sixth issue: **pressure**, or **oppression**.

It would seem vital to include in any education about sex and relationships the basic ethical rule that no individual should be pressured to do anything he or she does not want to do. Part of sex, and part of relationship, has to be what can be expressed like this: only what both partners want happens; and what either doesn't want does not happen. This relates also to the important issue of self-esteem, and of not being taken over by prevailing images or ideas of what is 'beautiful' or what is 'sexy'.

*And finally, **variety** and **exploration**. How wonderful if we could all find soul-mates and be satisfied for life. In fact, surely we are all curious and drawn by differences of expression and experience. How do we deal with that as adults, let alone advise our children. I don't have an answer. But I regard this as a vital ambiguity.*

Well. Unfortunately within the current scope of what is required to be taught in schools, very little of the above is adequately covered. I don't need to be an expert or a researcher or have a lot of special information about what actually happens in schools to hold that view. I honour the teachers - heroes and heroines all - who have to navigate their way through this minefield. And the kids who are growing up in our confused society. (I have four grandchildren, one of whom is still at school).

I hold in high regard a book and website by Justin Hancock, it's called 'Sex Relationships And You', for those aged 14 and over. He seems to cover pretty much most of the issues above. Web link is < www.bishuk.com >