

MATING IN CAPTIVITY: RECONCILING THE EROTIC AND THE DOMESTIC
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“The flame is the most subtle part of fire, moving upwards and raising itself above in the shape of a pyramid. The original primordial fire of eroticism is sexuality; it raises the red flame of eroticism, which in turn raises and feeds another flame, tremulous and blue. It is the flame of love and eroticism. The double flame of life.”

Octavio Paz, The Double Flame

Love and Desire/security and adventure

- Love and desire, they relate and they conflict. Herein lies the mystery of eroticism.
- Love is about having; it seeks to know our partner. Desire is about wanting, it requires the ongoing elusiveness of the other.
- Love and desire spring from separate and distinct motives, they are separate experiences.
- Reconciliation of love and desire, passion and intimacy, is the reconciliation of two sets of conflicting fundamental human needs: the need for safety and security, stability and predictability, continuity and permanence on one hand and the need for risk and novelty, the quest for the unknown, adventure, and transcendence on the other.
- The ability to tolerate our fundamental aloneness is the key to sustaining erotic desire. It’s about intermittent merging.
- Partners need to negotiate their dual needs for safety and stability with their wish for unpredictability and even risk.

Sexuality vs Eroticism

SEXUALITY

- It is rooted in nature; all animals have sexuality.
- Has only limited possibilities.
- Is inseparable from its reproductive function.
- We are born sexual and sensuous, we become erotic.

EROTICISM

- The erotic landscape is vastly larger, richer, and more intricate than the physiology of sex, or any repertoire of sexual techniques. If a sex can be a collection of urges and acts, the erotic is a receptacle of our hopes, fears, expectations and struggles.
- It is a metaphor of sexuality.
- It is sexuality transformed by the imagination, which is exclusively human.
- By its origin, eroticism is sex/nature; by its human creation and function in society it is culture.
- It is infinite. It invites constant invention and variation.
- It thrives on the forbidden, the mysterious and the transgressive.
- Where nothing is forbidden, nothing is erotic.
- It plays with ceremony, representation and ritual.
- Pleasure is an end in itself.
- It is always plural, even in solitary pleasures, we invent imaginary others.

“High states of arousal flow from the tension between persistent problems and triumphant solutions. We are most intensely excited when we are a little off-balance, uncertain, “poised on the perilous edge between ecstasy and disaster.”

*--Jack Morin, *The Erotic Mind**

“A sexual relationship is like learning a script neither of you has read. But you only notice this when one of you forgets your lines. And then, in the panic, you desperately try and remember something that you haven't really forgotten. You hope the other person will prompt you. You start to hear voices offstage. You bring another character.”

*--Adam Phillips, *Monogamy**

Therapeutic considerations:

“Romance does not fade over time, it becomes riskier.”

--Stephen Mitchell, *Can Love Last?*

- Sexuality is not just a metaphor of the relationship; it is also a parallel narrative. Hence relationships can be vastly improved with no change in the sexual arena of the couple’s life. Strengthening the mutuality, caring and companionate affection is not enough to generate erotic desire. Current marital literature focuses on how the couple’s dynamics are reflected in the bedroom, thus starting the inquiry with the analysis of the emotional connection and then linking it to the sexual relation. Inverting the usual therapeutic priorities, and asking about their sexuality first, offers a window into the couple’s interpersonal dynamics, the intra- psychic layers and the family of origin issues.
- Keep in mind that we don’t know our partners as well as we think we do. To maintain the mystery and the elusiveness of our partner is key to sustaining desire.
- While we strive to create safety, it is also only an illusion. We are never totally safe from loss.
- Therapist can help couple introduce small transgressions, illicit strivings and passionate idealizations in the midst of a safe and predictable life, i.e. help them to make what is too available sufficiently interesting.
- Challenge the emphasis on verbal communication and recognize that intimacy speaks many languages.
- Grant permission for fantasy, draw pleasure from the hidden, the mysterious and the suggestive; expand the boundaries while respecting the need for safety and stability.

“If it is the forbidden that is exciting, if desire is fundamentally transgressive, then the monogamists are like the very rich; they have to find their poverty, they have to starve themselves enough, in other words they have to work if only to keep what is always to available, sufficiently illicit to be interesting.”

Adam Philips, “Monogamy”

Summary:

WHAT DIMINISHES DESIRE?

- To much familiarity, comfort
- Boredom and emotional disengagement
- Lack of novelty and variation
- The transition to motherhood
- Busy, stressful lives-
- De-erotization of the partner
- The contrived illusion of safety

WHAT MAINTAINS DESIRE?

- Fluid communication, intimacy, emotional differentiation
- Validation, being seen
- Separateness and space, difference
- Seduction, anticipation, playfulness, novelty, curiosity
- Ability to tolerate our fundamental alones
Not fully knowing our partner
- Playfulness, variation, uncertainty, unpredictability, mystery
- Our erotic perception of our partner
- Fantasy and imagination
- The respect for sexual idiosyncrasies; they are key to who we are.
- Stay out of the bed.
- Limited intake of pornography
- Erotic privacy (secrets hurt intimacy, privacy enhances it)
- To know that we do not own our partner
- Permission to reach beyond our limits, to transcend our boundaries
- Permission to experience aggression and power; i.e. power plays, role reversals, unfair advantages, imperious demands, seductive manipulations, subtle cruelties

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