

Rolheiser: What we haven't got right about sex

Several years ago, in the question and answer period after a public lecture, a rather disgruntled young man asked me a question that carried with it a bit of attitude: "You seem to write a lot about sex," he said, "do you have a particular problem with it?"

My lecture had been on God's mercy and had never mentioned sex so his question obviously had its own agenda.

My answer: "I write 52 columns a year and have been doing that for over 30 years. On average, I write one column on sex every second year, so that means I write on sex, on average, every 104 times I write. That's slightly less than 1% of the time. Do you think that's excessive?"

I highlight this exchange because I'm quite conscious that whenever a vowed celibate writes about sex this will be problematic for some, on both sides of the ideological spectrum. Be that as it may, by referring here to two insightful quotes by Gary Gutting, I want to suggest that our culture would do well to courageously examine its views on sex to see where our current ethos regarding sex might be not serving us well. Here are the quotes:

Writing in an issue of *Commonweal* (September 23, 2016), Gutting says: "We do, however, need an ethics of sexuality, and the starting point should be the realization that sex is not 'fun'. That is, it's not an enjoyable activity that we can safely detach from things that really matter. Sex isn't like telling a joke, drinking good wine, or watching a basketball game. It's not just that sex is more intense; it also taps emotional and moral depths that ordinary pleasures don't. Core human values such as love, respect, and self-identity are always in play. 'Casual sex' is a dangerous illusion. Sex is a problem for us mainly because we conflate it with fun."

Two years later, in another issue of *Commonweal* (March 19, 2018), commenting on the moral outrage that sparked the #MeToo movement, he writes: "Our outrage may seem anomalous, particularly in the Hollywood context, because the entertainment industry – along with advertising, the self-help industry, and the 'enlightened' intellectual – is a primary source of the widely accepted idea that sex should be liberated from the seriousness of moral strictures and recognized as just another way that modern people can enjoy themselves. ... I'm not a cynic, but I do think it's worth reflecting on the tension between moral outrage over sexual harassment and the ethics of liberated sexuality. The core problem is that this ethics endorses the idea that sex should typically be just another way of having fun. ... This ethics is open of course to the idea that sex can also be an expression of deep, committed, monogamous intimacy, but is still

sees no problem with sex that begins and ends as just fun.”

Can sex begin and end as just fun? Many within our culture today would say yes. It seems this is what we have evolved to.

In the short space of a half century we’ve witnessed a number of paradigm shifts in how our culture values sex morally.

Until the 1950s, our dominant sexual ethos tied sex to both marriage and having children. Sex was considered moral when it was shared inside of a marriage and was open to conception.

The 1960s excised the part about sex being tied to having children as birth control became acceptable within the culture. But sex still needed to be within a marriage. Pre-marital and extra-marital sex, though prevalent, were still not seen as morally acceptable.

The 70s and 80s changed that. Our culture came to accept sex outside of marriage, providing it was consensual and loving. Sex, in effect, became an extension of dating. Today’s generation was born and raised inside that ethos.

Finally the 1990s and the new millennium brought still a more radical shift, namely, “hook-up” sex, sex where soul, emotion, and commitment, are deliberately excluded from the relationship. For many people today, sex can be understood as purely recreational – and still moral – purely for fun.

What’s to be said about this? Can sex be purely for fun? My answer is the same as Gutting’s:

Sex purely for fun doesn’t work because, try as might, we cannot extricate sex from soul.

In the end, sex just for fun is not fun – except in fantasy, in ideology divorced from reality, and in naive novels and movies. For the sensitive, it invariably brings heartache, and to the insensitive it invariably brings hard-heartedness. To everyone it brings sexual exploitation. Most seriously, it leads to a certain loss of soul.

When soulfulness is not given its rightful place within sexuality, worse still when it is deliberately excluded, we end up selling ourselves short, not properly honoring ourselves or others, and at the end of the day this results in neither happiness within ourselves nor proper respect of others.

Soul is a commodity worth protecting, particularly in sex.