

Chapter 2

The Double Flame

Reconciling Intimacy and Sexuality, Reviving Desire

Esther Perel

“Love is about having and desire is about wanting.” This is the major observation that guides Esther Perel’s therapy as she works with couples complaining of loss of desire. She observes that lack of desire does not necessarily reflect a disordered relationship and that erotic ruts are part of being a loving, caring couple. She lays out a paradox: the very ingredients that nurture love are often the ones that erode erotic passion. Perel turns the usual therapeutic approach on its head with this suggestion: first improve the sex, an improved relationship will follow.

In order to reconcile the paradox that inevitably exists between the wish for an all-knowing intimacy and the heightened passion that accompanies the unfamiliar and unpredictable, it is necessary to cultivate mystery and tolerate separation. As she observes, “Desire balks at consistency and is motored by absence and longing.” Fantasy and imagination constitute key ingredients in liberating and reawakening desire, not insistence, demands, or negotiation. It is not the innovative techniques she is after, but the experience of anticipation surrounding the mystery of the other and the unknown in ourselves.

In her fascinating case description, Perel illustrates how the unique erotic blueprints of Alicia and Roberto developed and were initially effective in supporting their erotic life. But in their current relationship they have

fallen into the familiar roles of pursuer and distancer, which satisfies neither. Furthermore, the way they are emotionally organized around each other is too reminiscent of their original families, which inevitably numbs all forms of sexual expressiveness.

The therapy engages the partners to uncover and to free themselves from their erotic blocks. Like so many women, Alicia dislikes Roberto's sexual directness, which she experiences as neediness. She wants seduction and transgression to lift her from her internalized prohibitions. For Roberto, familiarity breeds content and he values comfort and intimacy to spark his desire. Once they are encouraged to use their imagination and to discover new ways of seducing and beguiling each other, their erotic desire increases.

Perel concludes her chapter with the reminder that in long-term relationships, active engagement and willful intent are needed to nurture eroticism and maintain desire.

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THE DOMESTIC AND THE EROTIC

As a couple therapist, I see young and old, married or not, gay, bisexual, and straight, with passports from all over the world. Plenty has changed in my 25 years of private practice, but not my patients' opening lines. They tend to go something like this: "We love each other very much, but we have no sex." Next they'll move into describing relationships that are open and loving, yet sexually dull. Time and again they tell me of the paradoxical relationship between domesticity and sexual desire. They treasure the stability, security, and predictability of a committed relationship, they miss the excitement, novelty, and mystery that eroticism thrives on.

When they complain about the listlessness of their sex lives, they sometimes want more frequent sex, but they always want "better" sex. They want to recapture the feeling of connection, playfulness, and renewal that sex used to allow them.

Modern committed couples have a long list of sexual alibis that claim to explain the death of eros. They are too busy, too stressed, and too tired for sex. Eventually lamentations about the kids, the house, the job trail off, and more complex and nuanced obstacles

come forward: couples who are such good friends they cannot sustain being lovers; lovers so set on spontaneity that sex never happens at all. I see power struggles that escalate into erotic stalemates, emotional arrangements that are overly familial and blatantly desexualizing. Some clients feel sheepish, others rejected, and some are just plain confused—all of them, however, have experienced a genuine loss.

So why does great sex so often fade for couples who love each other as much as ever? Why does good intimacy not guarantee good sex? Why does the transition to parenthood spell erotic disaster? Can we want what we already have? Why is the forbidden so erotic? When we love, how does it feel, and when we desire, how is it different?

I seek to probe the ambiguities of love and desire in long-term relations, to explore the fears and anxieties that arise when our pursuit of safety and security clashes with our quest for passion and adventure. We seek predictability on one hand, and thrive on discovery and adventure on the other. Psychoanalyst Steven A. Mitchell (2002) makes the point that these are two fundamental, yet opposing human needs that pull us in different directions. Partners today need to negotiate their dual needs for *familiarity and novelty*, their wish for *certainty and surprise*. Yet it is difficult to generate excitement and anticipation with the same person we look to for comfort and stability.

In the West we take for granted the idea that marriage is the key to everything. We turn to one person to fulfill what an entire village (friends, community, extended family) once delivered. We expect our partners to be the primary supplier for our emotional connections, to provide the anchoring experiences of life. Intimacy and transparency in the romantic marriage are paramount, meant to help us transcend the aloneness of modern existence and be a bulwark against the vicissitudes of everyday life. We seek security, as we always have, but now we also want our partner to love us, cherish us, and excite us. For the first time in history, we have sex not because we want eight kids or because it's the woman's marital duty; today's couples count on desire and sexual fulfillment as key ingredients to a happy marriage. I believe we must recognize that reconciling the erotic and the domestic is not a problem we can solve, it is a paradox we manage.

THE NUMBING OF DESIRE

Traditional couple therapy believes that sexual problems stem from relationship problems. Poor communication, lack of intimacy, and

accumulated resentments are some of the explanations given to explain the numbing of desire. Find out about the state of the union first, see how it manifests in the bedroom second. The premise is that a troubled relationship equals no sex; improve the emotional relationship, and the desire will follow.

But my practice suggests otherwise. I've helped plenty of couples buff up their relationship and it did nothing for the sex. It made a difference in the kitchen, but it did little for the bedroom. Strengthening the caring and the companionate affection is often not enough to generate erotic desire. In such situations, I invert the traditional therapeutic priorities, asking about the partners' sexuality first. It becomes a window into the self, the couple's dynamics, and their families of origin. I flip the equation: improve the sex, and the relationship will follow. Sex is not a metaphor for the relationship, but rather a parallel narrative, one that speaks its own language.

Love and desire—they relate and they conflict, and herein lies the mystery of eroticism. The rules of desire are not the same as the rules of good citizenship. It is not always the lack of closeness that stifles desire, but too much closeness. Many couples are disappointed to discover that the closeness and comfort they crave are exactly what douses the fire. More intimacy doesn't always make for more sex. In fact, sometimes the very qualities that nurture intimacy—grounding, familiarity, and continuity—can be sexually deflating and drain the passion right out of our relationships.

Stability, understanding, and compassion are the handmaidens of a close, harmonious relationship, while eroticism thrives on novelty, mystery, and the unexpected. There is a complex relationship between love and desire—between a couple's emotional life together and their physical life together, and these don't always correspond. What is emotionally satisfying isn't necessarily sexually exciting. That's one reason why, to the chagrin of many, you can often "fix" the relationship and it will not do anything for the sex. Intimacy begets sexuality only sometimes.

If love is about having, desire is about wanting. Love wants to contract distance, and minimize the threat; it wants to collapse the tension. It seeks closeness and wants to know the beloved. Desire balks at consistency and is motored by absence and longing. For some of us, love and desire are inseparable. But for many others, emotional intimacy inhibits erotic expression. For them, the caring, protective elements that foster love block the freedom and unself-consciousness that fuel erotic pleasure.

Let me illustrate: Think of a little child who sits comfortably nestled on your lap. At some point she jumps off and runs out. At a distance, she stops, turns, and get her cues from the adult she just left. If the adult says, “Go ahead, kiddo, the world is a beautiful place with lots to discover. Have fun,” the little child turns away and runs further. She experiences both freedom and connection, and at the same time, the security of love and the autonomy of desire. This child who plays hide and seek will one day turn to eroticism as the adult version of hide and seek, where she’ll maintain playfulness and discovery, alternating between the dangers of hiding and seeking and the relief of finding and being found.

There is, however, another scenario with a very different outcome. This time the adult says: “What’s so beautiful out there? Isn’t being together enough? I am lonely, I am anxious, depressed ... ” Here, the child has a few choices. One of them is to return to base. They learn that in order not to lose that connection with the other, they’ll have to lose a part of themselves. In my experience these are often the people who, later on, will have a hard time making love to the person they love. The legacy of this bargain for attachment produces a puzzling inverse correlation where growing intimacy leads to diminished desire. In his book *Arousal: The Secret Logic of Sexual Fantasies*, Michael Bader (2002) explains that it isn’t a fear of intimacy or a lack of commitment that solders their block, rather it is the nature of their love—burdensome and confining—that stands in the way of the desire. The worry and responsibility they feel for their beloved forecloses the necessary spontaneity and selfishness for erotic abandon.

Sexual intimacy is an act of generosity and self-centeredness, of giving and taking. We need to be able to enter another without the terror that we will be swallowed and lose ourselves. At the same time we need to be able to enter ourselves, to surrender to self-absorption while in the presence of the other, believing that they will still be there when we return, that they won’t feel rejected by our momentary absence. The self absorption inherent in sexual excitement obliterates the other in a way that collides with the ideal of intimacy. So many people believe that they can be safely lustful and intemperate only with people they don’t know as well, or care about as much.

Tell me how you were loved, I’ll tell you how you make love. This is a construct I often work with. Our sexual preferences arise from the thrills, challenges, and conflicts of our early life. How these bear on our threshold for closeness and pleasure is the object of our excavation. Not coincidentally, our entire emotional history plays itself out

in the physicality of sex, and our erotic blueprints are layered with these childhood experiences.

FIRE NEEDS AIR

Desire wants to go where it hasn't yet been. It needs otherness, difference. But for erotic élan there needs to be a synapse to cross. Modern couples strive for oneness, yet eroticism thrives in the space between self and the other.

Because this concept may seem abstract, I routinely ask the following question: "When do you feel most drawn, most attracted to your partner?" The answers resonate with a remarkable similarity.

"After we've been apart ..., when he's confident and passionate about something he loves.... When she's unaware I'm watching her.... When he is talking with friends.... When he surprises me.... When we're at a party and I see others looking at her.... When she's standing on the other side of a crowded room, and she smiles just for me.... When he's playing with the kids.... [This is the only comment that is gender specific, for men rarely think that a mother playing with the kids is sexy.] When we're away from home, and have fun together.... When we dance ... When I ride on the back of his motorcycle ... When I see him play sports...."

Whatever the answer, it is never without an element of distance. It is a description where we look at our partner from a comfortable distance. Not too close because we cannot distinguish them from ourselves, and not too far, for then they are no longer in our field of vision. We see a partner who is separate, whose difference is magnified. And this person who is otherwise already so familiar is momentarily once again somewhat unknown, somewhat mysterious and elusive. More importantly, in none of these situations is the other needing us, nor do we need to take care of him or her. Caretaking may be very loving, but it is also a powerful anti-aphrodisiac. In sex, people want to feel wanted, not needed.

We create a bridge of things unknown by making a perceptual shift, and it is on this bridge, in the space *between* us, that we can meet and play with the erotic. Sometimes introducing mystery is nothing more than a shift in perception. In the words of Proust, "The

real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.”

The question posed earlier—“Can we want what we already have?”—invites us to admit that we never “have” our partners. It is our willingness to engage with the mystery that keeps desire alive. Faced with the irrefutable otherness of our partner, we can respond with fear or with curiosity. We can try to reduce them to a knowable entity, or we can embrace their persistent mystery. When we resist the urge to control, when we keep ourselves open, we preserve the possibility of discovery. Eroticism resides in the ambiguous space between anxiety and fascination. We remain interested in our partners; they delight us, and we’re drawn to them. It is not mere emotional anxiety, but rather the existential reality that there is no permanence, no lasting holding. When we trade passion for reality, maybe we are just trading one fiction for another. In the words of therapist Anthony Robbins, passion is commensurate with the amount of uncertainty we can tolerate.

EROTICISM AS ALIVENESS, PLEASURE, IMAGINATION

My interest is in the erotic, not only in the act of sex. The physical act of sex is often too narrow and it easily degenerates into conversations about numbers and performance. The erotic landscape is vastly larger, richer, and more intricate than the physiology of sex or any repertoire of sexual techniques. What people long for is radiance, beating back deadness.

This focus on eroticism comes from my work with traumatized populations and from growing up in a community of Holocaust survivors, where I always observed two groups. There were those who did not die, and those who came back to live. Those who didn’t die lived quite tethered to the ground, pouring their energies into finding basic trust, alleviating their fears, and guarding against a dangerous world outside. Pleasure for them was fraught with guilt and fear. Those who came back to live were eager to reenter the world, forge ahead, reconnect with playfulness and pleasure and take risks. They understood how to cultivate aliveness, vibrancy; they experienced the erotic as an antidote to death. This distinction also applies to the couples I work with: there are those who survive and those who are alive. I think of eroticism beyond the sexual meaning that modernity has assigned to it. Couples who have an erotic spark know how to cultivate a sense of

aliveness, vibrancy, and vitality over the long haul. They understand that the central agent of eroticism is the imagination. Not the one that focuses on new sexual positions, but one where we continue to imagine our partner with a compelling curiosity and we remain interesting and attractive to ourselves.

SEX AND INTIMACY SPEAK MANY LANGUAGES

No matter which country you are from, which language you first spoke, it is the language of the body that is the universal mother tongue. The body is a vital language, a conduit for emotional intimacy. As Roland Barthes wrote, “What language conceals is said through my body. My body is a stubborn child, my language is a very civilized adult.”

The modern world of coupledness has done much in the way of censoring both men and women in this primal parlance. For men, the body is often the center of tenderness and vulnerability, and it longs to speak. Our emphasis (or overemphasis, rather) on the macho, power-driven aspects of male sexuality works to mute the very expression we seek. Conversely, for women, the emphasis is on words, estranging them from a rich panoply of connection to their bodies. Any thoughts of lustfulness, physicality, or hunger are legitimized only when layered in relatedness or duty. With sex and intimacy at the epicenter of the couple’s identity, they need to give themselves permission to be bilingual.

In the case example that follows, I illustrate how these concepts play out and how I use them to reignite desire in a couple that have lost their erotic life.

CASE EXAMPLE: ALICIA AND ROBERTO

Alicia and Roberto, an attractive, intelligent, and loving couple come for treatment, complaining of their moribund sex life. Alicia is 30, born in a small village in Andalucia, to a devout Catholic bourgeois family. Her mother came from a family of 12 children, ruled under the strict authority of her father. After meeting her husband-to-be she married him quickly and was whisked away. They both shared the impatience of those who can’t wait to leave the hamlet and migrate to the big city, get an education, and move abroad. This is exactly what

they did, with two daughters in tow. Alicia was the oldest, and in her words: “I was my mom’s object.”

In the various European countries where her family lived, she could attend local schools but not become a local girl. Her mother was critical of the permissiveness she saw in the postmodern families. Like many other traditional immigrant families who confront today’s Western culture of family democracy and its unprecedented child centrality, Alicia’s parents were critical of the permissiveness they observed. They feared that unregulated freedom would expose their daughters to male predators, who would take advantage of them, sexually and emotionally.

Mom and Dad divorced, and the restrictions only grew. Alicia had to jump through the window to play with her friends and rendezvous with her secret boyfriend. She pieced together a sexual education bit by bit. From Mom she learned about the birds and the bees and menstruation, and received warnings about sexual dangers. From her friends she picked up her knowledge of romance and fun. One day she was caught and severely punished for being with her boyfriend. She opted for depression rather than rebellion.

With Alicia in a state of despondence, and Grandpa, the patriarch, dead, her mother started therapy. Surprisingly, she embarked on a systematic journey of rejection and transformation. Once a traditional, religious, compliant, rule-based, sexually numb, and discipline-driven woman, she became independent, pleasure seeking, emancipated, and liberated. She transformed so much that, according to Alicia, she jumped two centuries in 2 years.

Roberto’s roots were Andalucian as well. His grandfather was a world traveler, who brought his bewitching, dark-eyed Mediterranean woman to the Americas. At 33, Roberto was about to start a degree in public policy. He described an affectionate family—a father who took him on long walks, where they enjoyed solving the riddles of the cosmos. Mom was a jewelry maker, caring but withdrawn, and hard to talk with. One day, Roberto confronted her about her hermetic character, and her response came with tears: “That’s the way I am, I will not change.” That was his last attempt to get through.

As far as he can remember, Roberto’s parents never shared a bedroom, and only years later was he told why. Dad was physically and romantically effusive, Mom was not. So he took his hands and body to many other women. It was only in college that Roberto learned of the incessant dalliances of his father, a piece of information that became central to Roberto’s life. For reasons he is only now starting

to understand, he became a consummate lover. “Growing up, sex was a normal part of development. I didn’t associate much anxiety with sex. It was a source of pleasure, a conduit for intimacy and bonding. When my mother found condoms in my room, she said it was smart that I was using protection.”

Roberto liked girls, and girls liked him. He sampled and explored, and beginning with his first girlfriend, “I was purposeful and unfaithful. I became greedy, courting disaster to see how much I could handle at once without imploding. I was profoundly selfish, even though I was generous in bed. I was a master liar and cheater. Seeing how easy it was to lie, I became terrified it could be done to me.” His jealousy on constant alert, Roberto was afraid to be deceived himself.

After college, Roberto traveled to Spain for a fellowship, ready for new emotional incursions. He met Alicia in Barcelona, where she was studying at the university. She took him by the hand, leading him through the winding narrow streets, and introduced him to her favorite tapas, and they got tipsy on sangria. They fell madly in love. Alicia was very different from his mother or other girlfriends—she was vivacious, outspoken, and exuberant. Their sex was fast-paced and adventurous. After a few months, they began a long-distance relationship that lasted almost 2 years. Technology was their trusted accomplice. Phone sessions, Skype sex, e-mails, texting, and a trip here and there added fuel to the flame.

Finally, Alicia moved to Philadelphia, joining Roberto in his tiny studio. The next phase of their relationship began. Immigration came with many demands—learning to speak English, acquiring a visa, finding a job. In addition, there was homesickness and the stress of living in a noisy city. Roberto tried to cushion the shock. He showed Alicia the ropes, wrote her application letters, and served as her cultural translator.

Within a few months, their sexual ardor declined and slowly faded away. They attributed it to the changes they were going through. As Roberto later tells me, “It made sense, but none of the explanations made a difference.” Nevertheless, he wanted to make Alicia feel safe, so he curtailed his hobbies and social activities. Anything that Alicia didn’t share with him was taken off the list, and with it, his individuality. While this made Alicia feel safe, it made Roberto feel suffocated. But he was fearful of making Alicia unhappy. After all, she had left friends and family in Spain for him. How could he ask for more? But without a sex life, he felt barren.

Roberto had always enjoyed a robust appetite for the pleasures

of the flesh. For him, the plummeting of their sexual relation feels unending. He is frustrated and alarmed by the thought that things will never change and that he will revert to old behaviors of finding other women, but he is definite about one thing: he won't accept a carbon copy of his parents' relationship—a sexless marriage with a life of never-ending infidelities.

Initial Session

When I first meet the couple, they have been together for 6 years, the last 3 teetering on the verge of sexual collapse. Alicia is the one who withholds sexually, but she doesn't like the situation any more than Roberto. She vacillates between guilt and resentment, wishing he would not give up, and then demanding that he stop badgering her and leave her alone.

Roberto has become more clumsy, desperate, and unattractive. Alicia says she likes a confident man, but Roberto objects that it is difficult to remain confident in the face of constant criticism and rejection. More rejection leads to more loss of confidence, which leads to more neediness and then again more refusal.

Together we map the pattern of negative escalation, how it follows a sequence of complementary reactions. We draw from the other behaviors that match our expectations of them. The more Alicia reacts, the more Roberto pressures. The more he pressures, the more she distances, bemoaning his lack of subtlety. His desperate groping will make Alicia pull back even more although this is the opposite of what he wants. Her keeping him at bay will make him become even more needy, even though this is the last thing she wants. This dance of pursuit and distance is quite common, and on the surface it looks like a discrepancy of desire. I reflect that although it appears that Roberto wants sex and Alicia does not, in fact, they both are frustrated.

I know that Alicia is baffled by her lack of wanting. This is not the person she wants to be, nor the one she used to be and liked. As is often the case when people are mired in this predicament, when I ask Alicia to tell me about her sexual thoughts, she tells me about his. Her mind is filled with Roberto's wishes and disappointments, and she ends up being out of touch with her own wanting and feelings. Acutely aware of what *he* wants, she no longer knows what *she* wants.

I ask that she carry a notebook where she will write any erotic musings—catch them, write them, own them. We play with this tri-

partite equation, and in the coming weeks she will report if she was aware of having any sensations, feelings, thoughts, inclinations. At the next level, she'll see if she was able to bring them inside her: when we write, we commit ourselves on paper. And lastly, if she could own and remember them, it would help draw a boundary between her and Roberto, demarcating her sexual territory from his. This mindful exercise has been valuable and Alicia has been doing it since treatment began. Roberto is encouraged to do this as well.

In my work, I see the couple together, as well as individually. At times Alicia talks about her sexual meanderings alone, other times she shares them with Roberto. The individual sessions are always confidential. This allows each person to think alone, examine and clarify for themselves from a less defensive stance. They can decide what insights and questions they want to bring to the joint session, and how.

I see Alicia's block, but I don't immediately attribute it to a total lack of desire. I check: It is completely gone? On hold? Directed somewhere else? Alicia's sentence starts with "I have no desire," and I want to find out if the second part of the sentence will be "at home," "with him," or generally?

Our conversation veers to Alicia's dislike of Roberto's straightforwardness, his lack of suggestiveness, and blatant advances. "When he says, 'here's my cock, wanna take it' that is not playful for me. It's very American this pragmatic approach to sex," she says: "Direct, to the point, don't beat around the bush." "Does it diminish Roberto's sexual appeal?" I ask. She nods. Alicia taps into a common myth, the logic of which says: if I have to tell him what I like, what I am and what I want, it means he needs instructions, and if so, then he lacks intuitiveness, *savoir faire*. Conclusion: he is certainly not sexy, since a sexy man needs no tutorial.

At this time we unpack another cultural quandary. Historically and traditionally, the man who is sexually served by his wife needs no instructions, for what she wants is unimportant. But the man who hits the "right spots," the one who knows intuitively what she likes, is heralded as the man with the special touch, the one who doesn't need directions. Male arrogance has historically been met with female deference. But these stances continue to be reinforced today. While Alicia resents male superiority, she has difficulty accommodating to the alternative. When Roberto asks her for guidance, she regards him as less masculine. If he forges ahead with his lust, she reacts negatively about his lack of sensitivity.

Dismantling traditional gender roles takes a bit of psychological sleuthing, but little in one's erotic imagination is happenstance.

Alicia wants more play, not foreplay, an elaborate seduction, the "Juego," as she calls it—a choreography of seduction that alternates between approach and retreat, meant to stoke the wanting. The subtext reads: "You think I am attracted to you and that you can just have me, but you're wrong. You don't have me yet. Now I distance myself, I'll make you want me more. I come closer again and you think, this time, I got her. You're wrong again. I move away once more. You come after me. The more persistently you pursue me, the more attractive and irresistible I feel, which makes me move away some more to see if you'll keep coming after me, if I can make you want me even more."

Alicia tries to explain to Roberto that sex isn't something that starts at 7:00 and ends at 8:00. It's an attitude. Roberto replies that in the beginning Alicia didn't need any of this. She too was direct, aggressive, and open to the raw edge of desire. She recognizes his description, but she's in a different place now. Roberto is very open and willing—"I'll try anything." But rather than being receptive to Roberto's openness, Alicia responds that she doesn't like having to explain what she wants. I clarify that seduction isn't only about flooding the other with your wanting, but rather eliciting their own wanting—to seduce is not to induce. Roberto is willing to venture outside his comfort zone, but Alicia needs to be responsive. When she redirects his advances, she has to curb her criticisms. She can guide him and then resent him for not knowing, or she can appreciate a new generation of men who invite being directed and don't pretend to know.

I discuss with them that this playful attitude, the "Juego," is a way of relating to each other that is not just about being turned on, it is about maintaining an erotic interest for the other. They agree. I know that Alicia and Roberto play, but they describe it as "silly play," and while it's wonderful, it isn't sexy. It is a kind of play that is reminiscent of how children play: it can be sweet and affectionate, but it is unerotic. In fact, it often operates as a sexual appetite suppressor. When a couple becomes too familial, they desexualize the relationship. A hint of incestuousness hovers over them. Alicia points out that in order to engage in that *other* kind of play, she needs to feel safe; she is not interested in having that kind of play with a random person on the street. She'd like to be able to relax and let that side of her go, with him.

Roberto is intrigued by the fact that on one hand Alicia talks about wanting to be intimate with the person with whom she is playing these seductive games, but on the other hand, her predilection is for erotic games of anonymity, of not knowing the person. I clarify that play involving anonymity and fantasies about strangers—like going up to him at the gym and pretending she’s never met him in the context of an intimate relationship—springs from a familiarity that’s already been established. The secure connection is the base from which we freely enjoy “a room of one’s own,” and one for our partner as well.

Roberto tells me that for him, familiarity makes for better sex—he likes to feel comfortable, unencumbered. He likes the comfort released by emotional intimacy, the context, the sexual communication between him and his partner, and the ease he feels with himself. Comfortable is an erotic proposition for Roberto. When you feel familiar with someone, you no longer need to seduce, and the ease comes from the fact that the other person is there. At the same time, he’s beginning to recognize that within this comfort, maybe he has not left enough space for himself, and that his striving for transparency and wholesale sharing isn’t conducive to the mystery and the unknown that ignite desire.

For Alicia, “comfortable” resonates with “obvious” and with old expectations. “You’re supposed to have sex with your husband, obviously,” she says in her melodic Castilian accent. “And if it’s what you should do?” I ask her. “Then it’s not exciting,” she replies. “Does obviousness stir rebelliousness?” I pursue. “Yes,” she asserts. “When you emit a resounding no, you’re certain not to do what you’re supposed to do. It is a way to engage your free will.” As things stand now, her sexual autonomy manifests as a sexual lobotomy.

Alicia makes the connection that coming from a strict Catholic rule-based upbringing she learned that sex was a duty performed by women for men. Roberto is quick to inquire, if he didn’t want to have sex with her, would she be more interested? And the answer is yes, because it would release her from a feeling of duty and obligation and it would make room for her own independent wanting. It is difficult for her to want what he wants and still feel that it’s her own. So if he were not interested, then she could come forward, and there would be a boundary delineating her interest. I clarify that Alicia’s reaction isn’t about him. It is about insubordination and autonomy, a rebellion against the confines of matrimony and the traditional role of women performing sexual duties.

There is another transaction between them that goes in the same direction. Alicia is often interested in sex with Roberto after they've had a fight—something that goes against everything he likes about the comfort and ease of sex. For Roberto, who is always ready for sex, this is the one time where he's really turned off. When he's angry he's less in touch with how much he cares for her. Fighting and arguments create a greater separateness. Fighting legitimizes our thoughts, our feelings, and our needs. When we defend our cause, we boost our sense of entitlement. After a fight Alicia's sense of obligation is lessened and her sense of autonomy is heightened. Hence, she can experience the freedom and the selfishness needed for desire while for Roberto the opposite is true.

Understanding our erotic blueprint involves tracing the cultural and familial messages that we were raised with. In Alicia's case, they were presented to her in black and white: premarital sex is forbidden, marital sex is for babies—a woman's duty toward her husband—and pleasure is sinful. And while rationally she no longer believes this, she feels that these beliefs are engraved inside of her, reinforced by her large family of 12 uncles and aunts. It appears that while mother and sister forged ahead on the new road, Alicia became the repository of all that had been left behind. "I am the one carrying our legacy. It's as if all the prohibitions of my Catholic upbringing have been transferred onto me. I'm the one who's caught in this sexual and emotional conundrum. It's as if it all stayed with me, all the taboos."

I am aware that the forbidden can be very erotic, and that transgression can be an essential ingredient, and so I ask Alicia, "If pleasure is sinful, how does the forbidden become pleasurable?" The anonymity of the back of the taxi, the public places, the restaurants—all those forbidden places invite a lustful transgression for her. Digging into the secret logic of sexual fantasies, Michael Bader (2002) explains that in the sanctuary of the erotic mind we find a psychological safe space to undo the inhibitions and fears that roil within us. Alicia's fantasies state the problems and offer the solution. Her sexual imagination allows her to negate and undo the limits imposed on her by her conscience, by her culture, and by her self-image. Simply put: If she doesn't know him, she is free of the traditional female sexual duty and obligation.

And with this new insight, Roberto is beginning to find his way through the maze of Alicia's erotic mind. At this point however, he needs reassurance. He worries that he would have to give up one type

of closeness for another, that he would need to let go of a certain emotional intimacy in order to experience a sexual intimacy.

But Alicia doesn't make it easy for him. She feels she's at an impasse. She tells him of her conflict, between her love for the family she could have with him and the fact that family is the last place she can imagine having pleasurable sex. I suggest that they become cultural translators for one another and help each other navigate the split. I explain to them that I can imagine that all these public places, where you're not supposed to have sex, are exciting precisely because they take Alicia out of the family. There are no two places more different than the banquette in the restaurant and the matrimonial bed. At this moment, I have images from many of the Spanish and Portuguese movies I've seen of a room with a huge bed, complete with looming headboard, a crucifix on the wall, and women dressed in black. For a moment we enjoy naming some of movies with our favorite scenes of pleasure morgues.

There's a relief in the room, because for the first time both Roberto and Alicia feel that they're getting somewhere and that they're touching some of the roots of what has been so stultifying in the last 3 years. It is becoming clear why the circumstantial explanations always fell short.

Roberto wants to understand what Alicia means by "leaving home." Is it the domestic activities that Alicia needs to get away from? No. It is not the activities, it's the bed, and what one is *supposed* to do in that bed. In her mind, one is not allowed to experience pleasure in that bed. Women who experience pleasure are "*putas*." Roberto grasps why she always comes on to him in outside places.

Now that we have understood that in order for Alicia to put the "X" back in "sex" she needs to leave the home, we explore together the many ways they can do so. Alicia has a fervent imagination. As Roberto says, "she's a creative act"; she refers to him as a "great audience." Her rich fantasy life has helped her circumvent the pitfalls of the prohibitions of her upbringing. Our fantasies combine the uniqueness of our personal history with the broad sweep of the collective imagination. Our flights of fancy bridge the gap between the possible and the permissible. Fantasy is the alchemy that turns this jumble of psychic ingredients into the gold of erotic arousal.

We explore erotic spaces they can introduce into their relationship, all the while living in their tiny studio. Remembering their 2-year long-distance relationship, I suggest they bring back some of the very modes of communication that were so electrifying back then. I sug-

gest that they create separate e-mail addresses, ones that can not be used for domestic chores. This e-mail address exists outside of the family, so there is no need to navigate the two realms of experience: sex and family. It segregates the erotic into a sacred space, one exclusively reserved for erotic exchanges between them—their thoughts, memories, fantasies, and seductions. I point out that it is not meant to be a correspondence about the problems in their relationship, it is meant to be a space for play. I want them to use cyberspace to elicit curiosity, a sense of intrigue, and a kind of wholesome anxiety. Writing has many advantages over talking. You get to say your fill, craft your response, and give voice in writing to things your lips dare not utter. It provides a built-in distance, and I hope this will help them dismantle the inhibitions. There is a difference between sitting next to someone and saying, “Want to go to a movie” and texting them from the bathroom, “Do you want to go to a movie?” It can instantly lift one from the matter-of-fact to a subtle frisson. In the past 2 weeks this intervention has worked well, and they have used the technological built-in distance and anonymity to tease each other with unpredictability, playfulness, and mystery—all key erotic ingredients.

I also go back to one of their cherished activities when the Atlantic prevented them from touching each other: phone sex. They joke with me, saying that their home is too small to imagine the Atlantic. But once again, we agree that they will not get out of their quandary through reason and understanding, but by the force of their imaginations, which will take them away from *la cama matrimonial* (the matrimonial bed).

I offer a few more suggestions. They can read out loud to each other selected erotic writings, something they previously enjoyed doing together. Alicia can take Roberto to the video store and choose movies that show the kinds of seductive plots she enjoys. While these initiatives lighten up the conversation, and usher in a sense of humor, they don't spark any more interest. I ask both of them to list the things they enjoy doing—a comprehensive list of all that gives them pleasure, nothing to do with sex. Roberto realizes that he has truncated himself to such an extent that he feels uninteresting. I encourage him to reconnect with his friends, his local pub, his soccer team—in short Roberto needs to get Roberto back. That too will create some psychological space that should be propitious for desire to kick in.

Another suggestion adapted from Gina Ogden (2008), is offered to them. “Sit face to face and complete the statement: ‘I turn myself

off when... ’ Take turns and try to go back and forth for at least 10 or even 15 responses.”

Alicia answers, “I turn myself off when I log on to Facebook before going to sleep ... I turn myself off when I don’t have time for myself ... when I bring up our problems and frustrations when we finally have time to be alone for an evening ... when I don’t feel good about my body ... ”

Roberto answers, “When I think how long it’s been since we’ve had sex ... when I think about how I’m losing my hair ... when I am resentful of Alicia ... when I feel pressure to perform and powerless to please her.”

They are then instructed to complete another sentence: “I turn myself on when... ”

Alicia says, “I turn myself on when I don’t feel pressure to have sex ... when I take care of my body and looks ... when I think of our early years ... when I think of the great sex I have had with you and with previous boyfriends ... when I give myself permission to leave the house chores for later ... when I watch something that makes me get hot ... when I am proud of myself.”

Roberto says, “When I’ve just taken a shower ... when I cook great meals ... when we are apart for a while ... when I look at porn ... when I feel good about some accomplishments ... when I look at beautiful women ... when I fantasize about my past ... when we are having fun going to the movies and walking the streets ... when I feel good about my looks.”

The lesson to be learned from this exercise is that *we* are the ones responsible for our erotic energy, our sexual interest or lack thereof. If we are open, then we are more likely to feel desirable and desirous. Each of us makes choices: how not to let ourselves be shut down, and how to keep ourselves sexually open and available. Moreover, all the ideas are yours.

Commentary

For Roberto and Alicia, therapy is in full swing. After four sessions, the undercurrents of the sexual stalemate have been brought to light. From here on, we follow a two-pronged approach that navigates between understanding, and doing. New awareness and creative resources will jolt couples out of a state of complacency and helplessness, but the challenge every therapist faces is to ensure the lasting shelf life of the changes. Therapy runs the risk of following the Weight

Watchers trajectory: you gain the weight back as soon as you are out of the program.

Many of the internal tensions that crackle in the sexuality of Alicia and Roberto are located in the reverberations of their childhoods and in the cultural transmissions they internalized. A multilayered understanding, the motivation to change, and a good fit between the partners are necessary to sustain change. But that too is not a guarantee. I will be meeting with each of them alone to further probe the nuances of their predicament, but also to map ways to amp up their erotic pulse. The rhythm of the therapy is like a metronome—the needle points back and forth between the individual and the couple. Each partner brings memories, apprehensions, expectations, and judgments to the relationship. They are personal at first, but they always become relational later.

The topics of the individual sessions may be the same; the conversations will not. For example, the issue of seduction is high on the list for both Alicia and Roberto. I will explore this with each partner and will translate for the other afterward. I think that for Alicia, like many women, seduction is key. It goes way beyond a simple string of compliments and flattery. Seduction acknowledges that there is no automatic yes, that sex is not a given, an a priori entitlement to the other. Seduction recognizes the other as a free agent who can respond overtly, or suggestively, or choose to ignore it altogether. What matters is that the receiver is free, not coerced in any way. This need for autonomy and freedom is essential to desire. For some women it is difficult to respond when their partner initiates. The dance I have seen goes as follows: He initiates, she pulls back, a while later (5 minutes, an hour, the next morning) she initiates, and then he welcomes her and their bodies swiftly interlace. Quite often, though, he responds to her approach by framing it as a power dynamic. He is hurt, interprets her advances as a power maneuver where sex can take place only on her terms, is angry that she will not take him in when he wants to, but only when it suits her.

To my mind, this is a misunderstanding of the conflict. For Alicia, and for many women, accepting his advances blurs the line between giving and giving in. The refusal, the partner's respect for that refusal, and then the free return are the tortuous way some women need to take to experience the autonomy of their desire. It is important to stress that the maneuver is not about power over, but an attempt to delineate separateness, to ascertain ownership of desire. The lyrics of this song are as follows: "If I respond to you, I feel that I am giving

in. How can I do what you want and feel that I want it too? The only way I know it is my free will is if I come toward you alone. If the coast is totally clear, all mine, then I know it is totally my desire. Otherwise, I can't hold on to my own wanting in the presence of a strong wanting on your part. When I initiate sex, I know I want it, when you initiate sex, I know you want it. I wish to find a way for my desires to live side by side with yours, not needing to ignore yours as a way to protect mine from the fear of obliteration."

Over the years I have come to recognize the value of this interpretation. If Roberto accepts it, he will be able to play, take risks, create anticipation, and know that Alicia's entanglements with her desire are not meant as a rejection of him. She needs to say "NO" so that she can then say "Yes," and this quest for free choice is not a statement about him. Helping Roberto out of the crucible of rejection and helping Alicia grasp the conflict of autonomy will be separate conversations at first. Then once these concepts have been assimilated they will be discussed together.

My teacher, Salvador Minuchin, once likened therapy to sculpting. I recall him saying that first you tackle the raw material, and you carve out gross shapes. These are dramatic moves, big chunks fall off, there is noise, instant change. But then comes the long, tedious period of chiselling, where you steadily go over and over the small gestures, trying to carve the lasting shape, the details, the enduring. That is the middle phase of therapy, the longest one, and there is hard work, but it isn't very dramatic. The commitment to the project, the ability to overcome frustrations, delighting in the glimpses of the envisioned possibilities are all part of the course. The finale, followed by the unveiling, is a rare bliss.

I would like for Roberto and Alicia to experience sex as pleasurable, inviting, and not dutiful. If we continue and chisel away, they stand a good chance to find a space where they can revere the erotic and delight in its irreverence. Nevertheless, I will tell them that all couples go through periods where desire is dormant, that erotic intensity waxes and wanes, and that desire can suffer periodic eclipses and intermittent disappearances. But given sufficient attention, they'll learn to bring it back. Eroticism in the home requires active engagement and willful intent. Committed sex is premeditated sex. It is an ongoing resistance to the message that marriage is serious, more work than play, that passion is for teenagers. We must unpack our ambivalence about pleasure and challenge our pervasive discomfort with sexuality, particularly in the context of family. Complaining of sexual

boredom is easy and conventional. Nurturing eroticism in the home is an act of open defiance.

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