

CHILDREN OF THE GODS WHO ORGASM, OR TWO WOMEN LEAD ME TOWARD EROTIC FULFILLMENT

Name Withheld

I don't want to let go of the rod. I don't want to drift off and end up on paths that are dark, strange, and lonely. Sometimes I worry I may have already wandered without knowing it. I don't want to be disconnected from my loved ones or alienated from God's love. Lehi's dream provides vivid images of those fears.

Fear of taking the wrong path is one reason I've avoided the erotic. Eros's energy is intense, complex, and ambiguous. I have some firsthand experience with how others can abuse the erotic. Such abuse can have devastating consequences. Many of my experiences have left me feeling confused and ashamed of my sexuality, my body, my desires, and my fantasies. These outcomes and the experiences behind them, experiences I choose to keep private, are the reasons why I have requested that my name be withheld. I add that some messages I have found in the culture of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in North America are messages that discourage serious investigation of the erotic. These messages reinforce eros's messiness and danger, supercharging my fears. In the context of these frightening messages, a friend once joked that they would not have been surprised to hear of a general conference talk titled "One Shade of White."

But there are other powerful messages I hear in that same culture. There are statements about God's glory being intelligence and that one cannot be saved in ignorance. There are stories of members, pioneers, missionaries, and others exercising faith in the face of fears. There are

LDS mental health experts and sex therapists inspiring courage in addressing what I dread. And there is the foundational story of a child of God lacking wisdom, going into the woods, seeking, and then finding that wisdom.

Two women have been instrumental in my path out of some of my sexual shame. One has provided key intellectual insights that I will discuss at some length, while the other has offered spiritual direction that will receive a brief and more evocative treatment. My path might provide useful landmarks for others. The first woman to help me out of the darkness has been Audre Lorde.

Lorde's Guidance Down the Path

Audre Lorde was a powerful feminist voice in the second half of the twentieth century speaking from her position as an African American lesbian. I don't recall her ever being quoted in general conference. Lorde's essay "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" has provided guidance out of my confusion and fear. One of Lorde's purposes is to describe how patriarchy confuses and suppresses eros's power. Lorde says that "in order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives."¹ Lorde continues, "We have been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within Western society," and "as women, we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge."² Lorde

1. Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2007), 41. Lorde first published "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" as a pamphlet with Crossing Press in 1978. Lorde later published the essay in her book *Sister Outsider*.

2. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 41.

elaborates that because the erotic “has been made into the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation . . . we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information.”³ Suppressing the erotic—vilifying it, abusing it, devaluing it, and rendering it confused and trivial—all of those things rob women of a source of power and of deep, nonrational understanding as part of society’s systemic exclusion of women.

Lorde sheds light on a path toward the recovery of this lost power and knowledge. She says that the erotic “is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire.”⁴ In Lorde’s telling, this internal satisfaction is life-changing. She says that “having experienced the fullness of this depth of feeling and recognizing its power, in honor and self-respect we can require no less of ourselves.”⁵ Lorde’s sense of the erotic as “internal satisfaction” that brings a fulfilling “depth of feeling” can introduce us to something else going on in this essay. Lorde is bringing together two ideas about eros. So far, I have used the erotic and the sexual virtually interchangeably, but there is another use of eros. The second use of eros is a larger meaning that can include sexuality but encompasses much more. This use goes back to Greek sources like Plato’s *Symposium* wherein eros is the force urging one toward excellence. Lorde’s view of the erotic, which can include the sexual, is the power and drive toward excellence and the accompanying “fullness of depth of feeling” when one embodies that excellence.

The erotic, with its push to excellence, turns out to be a rather tall order. Lorde acknowledges as much when she says, “it is never easy to demand the most from ourselves, from our lives, from our work. To go beyond the encouraged mediocrity of the society that we live in is

3. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 42.

4. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 42.

5. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 42.

always fraught with danger and with fear, and the function of the erotic is to encourage excellence . . . and to give us the strength to pursue it.”⁶ Embracing eros’s power is a process fraught with danger and fear in a society that encourages mediocrity and misunderstanding.

Lorde anticipates another possible obstacle or misunderstanding of the erotic—scrupulosity or unhealthy perfectionism. Lorde says, “This internal requirement toward excellence which we learn from the erotic must not be misconstrued as demanding the impossible from ourselves nor from others. Such a demand incapacitates everyone in the process.”⁷ Lorde refocuses the discussion away from impossible demands and toward a larger function of the erotic: “For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing. Once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors brings us closest to that fullness.”⁸ Part of eros’s knowledge comes with the clarification of what brings about deep fulfillment, satisfaction, and completeness. This experience becomes the measuring stick for examining everything. I can assess to what degree such a fullness is present in my life endeavors. Eros moves me to excellence and teaches me the satisfaction, completion, and fullness that can accompany whatever I do.

6. In addition to publication, a recording of Lorde reading “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” is available on YouTube, posted Aug. 1, 2019, by growbean, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWmq9gw4Rq0&t=325s&ab_channel=growbean. In this reading, Lorde inserted ad-libs. It is unclear to me why those ad-libs were not included in subsequent printings of the essay, but I will quote from the reading since the ad-libs, in my view, provide useful clarifications and insight. The ad-libs cited here take place at 4:52–5:15 in the YouTube recording.

7. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 42.

8. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 42–43.

Eros and Mormon Intellectuals

Before I examine how Lorde's ideas might invite courage in exploring the erotic and the sexual for children of the Gods who orgasm, I want to connect Lorde's ideas about eros with what I think most of us do as Mormon intellectuals. This might seem like a sidetrack, but it is part of the path. I don't think that it would take much for most of us to admit that there is at least some anti-intellectualism in Mormon culture. We may have recently been cautioned about taking counsel from those who don't believe.⁹ If we take that prophetic warning and add the trump card that any idea someone doesn't like can be labeled and then dismissed as "the philosophies of men mingled with scripture," then we end up with a culture that suppresses intellectual exploration. Intellectual pursuits can thereby be, to use Lorde's words, "vilified, abused, and devalued" while being cast as "the confused, the trivial, the psychotic."

The intellectual and the erotic appear to me as shared paths. The erotic for Lorde provides "an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire." This experience becomes a benchmark, such that "once we know the extent to which we are capable of feeling that sense of satisfaction and completion, we can then observe which of our various life endeavors brings us closest to that fullness." This sense of internal satisfaction and completion in the intellectual realm is something I started to taste from a young age. I have experienced this thrilling intellectual completeness in books and articles, in classrooms and at scholarly conferences. Some members of my family and church have expressed concerns that my intellectual pursuits were driven by pride or would lead me off the path. For me, my experiences demonstrate eros's fullness and Lorde's insight that "to go beyond the encouraged mediocrity of the society that we live in is

9. Russell M. Nelson, "Think Celestial!," Oct. 2023, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2023/10/51nelson?lang=eng>.

always fraught with danger and with fear, and the function of the erotic is to encourage excellence . . . and to give us the strength to pursue it.”¹⁰

I think some of us turn to sources like *Dialogue* because, despite the danger and fear we encounter in a culture that encourages intellectual mediocrity, we feel a force encouraging excellence, giving us strength to pursue it, and rewarding those efforts with a sense of satisfaction and completion. I add that many of us seem to see those pursuits as efforts to be like our heavenly parents in courage, faith, light, and intelligence. If developing thinking and feeling skills are God-given capacities, then we are attempting to increase and grow them like the servants in the parable of the talents who are given money to invest. I enjoy reading *Dialogue* to reap the rewards of the work others do to develop their faculties. I learn from you and am inspired by your excellence.

The Glory of God is Erotic Fullness

For me, then, sexual development is like intellectual development. Eros inspires both when it is understood as the quest for growth and excellence. Both can be shrouded in confusion and fear. Where “anti-intellectualism” describes efforts where intellectual pursuits are “vilified, abused, and devalued,” an umbrella term describing similar efforts against sexual development is “purity culture.” One key difference between developing these twin divine capacities is that there is a tradition of intellectual excellence in Mormon culture. We have brave thinkers past and present, and even if there is a tension, at least there are clear, positive examples. There are biographies featuring faithful people developing their intellectual capacities. There are no biographies charting sexual development of faithful Latter-day Saints. What we have instead is President Spencer W. Kimball’s famous and frightening construal of sexuality in *The Miracle of Forgiveness*.¹¹ I think that there are

10. Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” YouTube recording.

11. Spencer W. Kimball, *The Miracle of Forgiveness* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1969).

some increasingly useful efforts and voices in the present encouraging sexual development. Jennifer Finlayson-Fife, a licensed therapist and sexuality educator, comes to mind. And while we have Laura Brotherson's *And They Were Not Ashamed*,¹² this book does not emerge from a long-standing tradition nor do I think it has a similar impact as something like Richard Bushman's *Rough Stone Rolling*.¹³

Another contrast between intellectual and sexual exploration and development is how we typically talk about them with respect to God. Despite all the anti-intellectualism, at least we can turn to a phrase like “the glory of God is intelligence” (D&C 93:36). I don’t anticipate an upcoming prophetic announcement that the glory of God is erotic and sexual fullness. In fact, I’m banking on many readers being at least a little taken aback with the idea that we are children of the Gods who orgasm. Try tossing that phrase out in Sunday School. In a culture that, as Lorde said, vilifies, devalues, confuses, and trivializes the sexual side of the erotic, it may be difficult for many members to even imagine our heavenly parents as sexual beings. It can be difficult to imagine sexuality as part of their divine and complete nature.

Drawing a parallel between the more readily understood intellectual development and sexual development has clarified challenges and possibilities for me. I can embrace both aspects of God’s glory. This has helped me along the path.

Two Trees Along the Path

Another helpful thing I’ve encountered on my path has been two Book of Mormon trees. I began this discussion with images of a path, a path leading to a tree in Lehi’s dream. The two Book of Mormon trees I turn to now, trees that can reveal more about sexual development, are Jacob’s

12. Laura M. Brotherson, *And They Were Not Ashamed: Strengthening Marriage through Sexual Fulfillment* (Boise, Idaho: Inspire Book, 2004).

13. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005).

tame and wild olive trees. In this allegory, the tame tree, as we recall, grew old and began to decay. Despite efforts to encourage new growth, “the main top thereof began to perish” (Jacob 5:6). The Lord of the vineyard decided to remove and destroy the withering main branches of the tame and graft in their place branches from the wild olive tree (verse 7). This entire grafting effort was done to preserve the roots of the tame olive tree (verse 11). The initial response was that the wild branches helped the tame trees bear fruit. There were some positive and some mixed results in other trees in the vineyard. When the Lord of the vineyard returned after a long time, the Lord found “all kinds of bad fruit” (verse 32). The wild had taken such control of the tree that the fruit was of no value (verses 34–37). Still, the Lord believed that the trees’ roots were good. The Lord’s initial plan was to level the vineyard and start over, but the servant advised patience (verse 50). The Lord decided on another round of grafting along with plucking the branches with the most bitter fruit (verse 52). Branches from natural trees that had become wild were grafted with other trees in the vineyard, the branches bearing the most bitter fruit were removed, and all of the trees were gradually pruned of the bitter fruit so that the roots could “take strength because of their goodness” (verse 59). The good replaced the bitter (verse 66). The allegory’s outcome was that the energy and vitality from the wild branches gave new life to the decaying tame trees, and once the energy from the wild had been properly incorporated and the bitter had been pruned, strong trees bearing robust, good fruit emerged, grew, and flourished.

Just as the wild trees have a unique vitality lacking in the natural but tame and decaying tree, so can erotic exploration—be it intellectual or sexual—bring with it strength and power. My education has brought new ideas and new energy to my beliefs and testimony. Sometimes the energy of those new ideas has threatened to overpower the tame and traditional belief foundation. The power of those new ideas can result in some unusual fruit. I have experienced the fits and starts

Jacob describes. But time and patience have helped me preserve the roots of faith, hope, and love toward my heavenly parents. The energy of “wild” new ideas has brought power to the roots and strength to the tree. “Wild” ideas have strengthened the natural tree.

I’m in the process of doing the same sexual work. I’m stepping into my shame and fear about my body, sexuality, desires, and fantasies instead of cowering. I remember first hearing about French kissing in elementary school and thinking it was dangerously wild, taboo, and unhygienic. I grew beyond that fear. Now I’m asking myself what other seemingly “wild” aspects of sexuality might bring a new strength, vitality, growth, and development. I understand there will be fits and starts, but I’m less afraid of either failure or of getting overwhelmed. I’m less afraid of some occasional bitter fruit. All of that is part of the process. And there is one more key aspect of this path out of shame, confusion, and fear, and into erotic and sexual fullness.

The Second Guide

The essential second guide along my path is, of course, our Heavenly Mother. To give a sense of her role for me, I have a recent experience. I have a new church calling. As part of my calling, before I had even started, I was invited to an online Zoom training meeting. There were a couple dozen people in the meeting. Presiding was someone I didn’t know but who I respected. As the meeting was about to start, the presiding leader asked me to offer the opening prayer. This instantly set off a shock of electric anxiety in me. Over the last couple of years, I have been struggling with whom to address when I pray. Personally, since I believe a Heavenly Mother and Heavenly Father are listening and answering, I address my prayers to them. But I’m hesitant to begin my public prayers in a similar manner. To me, at least now, it feels too disruptive and too taboo for many members. So, what I do in my public prayers is a sort of gradualist compromise. I address our Heavenly Father and express love for him, and then I thank him for a loving

Heavenly Mother who also hears and answers our prayers and who also sent her son to die for us and show us the way back to them. The rest is standard-issue prayer material. While I have prayed in this manner before Sunday School and in other public settings, this situation made me very nervous. I don't know if it was stubbornness and pride or faith and courage—it was probably a weird mixture of all four—but I decided to pray as I always do. When the prayer was over, the presiding leader paused for a beat and said, "Someday I look forward to sitting down and talking with Heavenly Mother." My immediate thought was, "Um, you can do that right now!"

When I thought about this experience after the meeting, I tried to determine the precise mixture of the four motivations—stubbornness, pride, faith, and courage. I also asked myself why I felt it was so important to pray in that manner. As I thought about it, I concluded that my Heavenly Mother is far too important to me to not address her every time I pray. She has been my essential second guide down the path.

Part of what has made my painful sexual experiences so damaging is that I have not been able to shake the belief that my sexual desires make me bad, filthy, and unworthy. My desires bring an uncertain and ambiguous energy, and, given long-standing painful and shameful experiences, that energy has come to seem ugly to me. It has taken time and effort to change that view. I have spent hours talking with my Heavenly Mother about sexuality in the most specific ways. I have spoken with her about my body, what it is, what it can do, and what it has done. Over time I have come to see that my body is something my loving Heavenly Mother and her husband have given me. My body is like the ones they have. I have dedicated time in many, many prayers thanking both of them for every part of my body, naming and feeling gratitude for each. I have come to believe and to feel deeply that she is, like him, someone who loves her body and loves what it can do. She loves her desires. She joyously embraces everything about her sexuality, including her fantasies. We have a running joke, my Heavenly Parents

and I, about what they use as their safe words.¹⁴ Let that thought rattle around in your soul! Oh, and probably don't mention God's safe words in Sunday School.

When I prayed at the start of the Zoom meeting, even though I felt nervous and anxious, I could not fail to acknowledge she who has done so much to lead me out of shame, fear, and confusion. I'm still on the path. The day after I completed a draft of this essay, I realized that I'm still trying to believe, or, better yet, fully embrace, what I have written. In my life now I look for something Lorde described to make sure I'm on the right path. Lorde put it this way:

Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy, in the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, making love, examining an idea.¹⁵

I believe I'm on the right path when that path increases my capacity for joy. The right path is one where everything I do is part of moving toward the fullness that my Heavenly Parents embody. The right path reveals who they are and encourages me, no matter what I'm doing, to embrace my potential and become like them.

14. One is "Worcestershire," and a newish one is "Mormon."

15. Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 44–45.

NAME WITHHELD is an active member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I served as a missionary and was married in the temple. I have had my thoughts published in *Dialogue* and other LDS-oriented publications. In my dream world I would make enough money to buy a lot of wonderful art and then donate it to small and struggling museums. The tag on the wall would read, "Donated anonymously."