Erotic Vitality and Disturbance

by **William F. Cornell, M.A.**

Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death. (Bataille, 1986, p.11)

Erotic passions have had a precarious place in the history and values of psychotherapy.

At the heart of the issues I want to raise in this essay is a reconsideration of the place of passion and of the erotic within contemporary psychodynamic psychotherapies. I will examine some of the trends in contemporary therapeutic culture that seem to foster the disappearance of sexuality from the heart of our emotional, relational and therapeutic landscape. I hope here to enlarge our vocabulary as somatic psychotherapists in our conceptualization and discussion of the nature of sexuality and the erotic. How do we speak more richly of the erotic body, to the passionate body? How do we develop a language of passionate and erotic attachments? I will draw upon and quote at length from the writings of contemporary psychoanalytic writers, as well as poets, popular song writers and social critics, whom I find to be exploring the nature of erotic life in ways that are richer than those evident in contemporary body-centered literature. I quote authors whom I have found to be unusually successful in capturing erotic realms in language.

Muriel Dimen, a psychoanalyst, feminist and articulate critic of the contemporary de-eroticization of psychoanalysis, points out that in much of the current psychotherapeutic and object relations literature, "Sexuality has become a relation, not a force" (p.418). In this essay I want to communicate a sense of the *force* of the body, the *force* of sexuality, the *force* of desire. Passion suggests a union of love and sexuality within a wish to create states of mutual ecstasy, with an intensity that approaches the edge of madness in the arms of another. At their best, these are indeed moments of madness – the madness of union and reunion, desire imbued with both aggression and vulnerability, fugues of past and present realms of my body with that of another.

I have subtitled this article "erotic vitality and disturbance" to speak to broader reaches of sexuality and the erotic. I draw here from David Mann's definition of the nature of the erotic:

> The erotic includes all sexual and sensual feelings or fantasies a person may have. It should not be identified solely with attraction or sexual arousal as it may also include anxiety or the excitement generated by the revolting. In my use of the term, it will imply an emphasis on fantasy rather than actual sexual activity: there is no sexual activity devoid of an underlying fantasy; on the other hand, fantasies do not always lead to activity. (1997, p.6)

It is often the realm of the erotic fantasies within the therapeutic relationship that represents the initial exploration of desire, of emerging possibilities, exciting and disturbing to therapist and client alike.

A Vanishing Landscape

Why do we do psychotherapy these days? What are clients looking for in seeking psychotherapy these days? A review of the clinical literature of the past decade or so would suggest that psychotherapists are responsible for providing--and clients are longing for--an experience of relatedness: a holding environment, a supportive and empathic transference relationship. Safety and compassion seem to have the upper hand these days over conflict and passion within the therapeutic process. Michael Vincent, a psychotherapist and social critic, comments, "I have seen enough so-called therapeutic caring dished out on the fringes of my professional life to conclude that indiscriminate caring is just another kind of carelessness" (pp. 196-197). Center stage in contemporary American psychodynamic psychotherapies are versions of object relations and attachment-focused theories, feminist-based models of mutuality and connectedness, trauma & victim/perpetrator-centered theories and techniques, and New Age spirituality and mysticism. None of these models are overtly anti-sexual, but none value sexuality or emphasize sexual passion as a central and enduring aspect of human nature, personal maturation or therapeutic outcome. Often these theoretical paradigms suggest a none-too-subtle anxiety about and distancing from adult sexual desire, representing a domestication of erotic passions.

Andre Green, the prominent French psychoanalyst, sees sexuality as linked in the most fundamental fashion to human vitality. Green, invited to give the Sigmund Freud Birthday Lecture at the Anna Freud Center in 1995, delivered a provocative address entitled, “Does Sexuality Have Anything to Do with Psychoanalysis?”. In it he raised a series of questions to his psychoanalytic colleagues regarding the goals and intentions of contemporary psychoanalysis:

> We should ask: what is important? What has the greatest value? The price of life is attached to what all human beings share and are longing for: the need to love, to enjoy life, to be a part of a relationship in its fullest expression, etc. Again, here we are confronted with our ideology of what psychoanalysis is for. What is its aim? Overcoming our primitive anxieties, to repair our objects damaged by our sinful evil? To ensure the need for security? To pursue the norms of adaptation? Or to be able to feel alive and to cathect the many possibilities offered by the diversity of life, in spite of its inevitable disappointments, sources of unhappiness and loads of pains? (1996, p. 874)

In this talk and subsequent work, Green challenges the lack of attention within contemporary psychoanalysis to sexuality in theory or technique. Green would not suggest that the "sexual revolution" of the 1960’s has cured sexual malaise. Quite to

the contrary, he notes, "Our patients still complain about disturbances in their sexual lives with more or less complete impotence, frigidity, lack of satisfaction in sexual life, conflicts related to bisexuality or to the fusion and defusion of sexuality and aggression, to say the least" (p.872).

I would suggest that this is true not only of psychoanalysis, but most contemporary psychotherapies. It is as though sexual passions have quietly vanished from the therapeutic landscape, to be replaced to pre-oedipal desires, an emphasis on traumatic intrusions (in lieu of traumatizing desires?), relational and empathic injuries, and spiritual quests of one stripe or another.

In his Freud birthday lecture Green argues:

> Moreover, it frequently happens that when we listen to the material presented by colleagues during meetings, the manifest presence of sexuality—either through dream material or unconscious fantasy, or even in the reports of the patient's life and relationships with others—is interpreted in a way which bypasses the sphere of sexuality to address object relationships of a supposedly deeper nature, in a way which refuses to pay attention to the specific sexual aspects that are very often supposed to be a mere defence. (1996, p.873)

Adult sexual issues are not inevitably defensive smokescreens against earlier, and therefore deeper and more primitive, preoedipal and infantile longings and trauma. Green goes on to suggest that "the role of a sexual relationship is not to feed and nurture but to reach ecstasy in mutual enjoyment" (p.877). Of course, achieving this mutual ecstasy and maintaining a passionate adult erotic relationship is no easy matter. There is perhaps nothing more thrilling, unpredictable, unsettling, revealing, and often deeply disturning than the co-mingling of erotic desires.

What has happened to genitality, pleasure, lust, orgastic surrender? Green argues, and I agree, that sexuality is the most enduring and exciting force that can sustain people in the face of life's vicissitudes, it's myriad disappointments and frustrations. Mann argues:

> The erotic is the very creative stuff of life and is inextricably linked to passion. It is a maverick, capable of the unexpected, and is the therapeutic momentum in analysis. The issue is one of passion, an intensity of feeling with no east resolution; but out of the heat of passion old links are weakened and new links can be forged. Passion of all kinds dominate the analytic setting: hate, anger, aggression, envy – and hardly less so, love and the erotic. However, the erotic transference, like Eros himself, has been left to the margins of analysis, never quite making it to the acceptable family of ideas in psychoanalytic theory and practice. (1997, pp.4-5)

In my reading of much of the contemporary therapeutic literature, I see the effort to sanitize life and psychotherapy. All too often the role of the psychotherapist now

seems to be that of buffering the client against the vicissitudes of psychic and erotic life, rather than entering into these experiences as part of the therapeutic effort.

I think of how often my clients struggle with disappointments in an idealized fantasy of tender, romantic and selfless love. I see a version of this ideal in Judith Jordan's perspective on adult sexual love:

> Women are often attuned to and want sensitivity to feeling, while men tend to focus more on action. ...Often mutuality comes more easily for women in woman-to-woman relationships, which can provide wonderfully sustaining mutual empathy and care. …in sexual engagement there is such a rich potential for expression of exquisite attunement and the possibility to give one's attention in equibalance to self and other. There can be mutual surrender to a shared reality. It is the interaction, the exchange, the sensitivity to the other's inner experience, the wish to please and to be pleased, the showing of one's pleasure and vulnerability that that implies which distinguish the mature, full sexual interaction from the simple release of sexual tension." (pp. 89-90)

This is a heady and subtly judgmental, one might even say coercive, perspective. Who, we might ask, can argue with a goal, a vision, of "exquisite attunement"? To my ears, however, it has the ring of an idealized, rather sentimentalized vision of maternal tenderness and resonance. Where, I wonder, is the aggressive component of sexual passion, the capacity to excite and disturb, the desire to get to and under a lover's skin, to get into the other in such a way that you will not be forgotten, to be taken over by one's lover, to impose oneself upon the other, to penetrate and be penetrated? I still recall the stunning excitement of punk rocker Patti Smith's transformation of Bruce Springstein's "Because the Night" into a glorious evocation of female sexual desire. Contemporary women artists, writers, and psychoanalysts are reclaiming the full scope of psychic and erotic life for women and men alike. Emmylou Harris, once the blonde-headed "Sweet Heart of the Rodeo," has darkened her voice and vision in recent years:

> The devil is deep water baby
> And I'm in way over my head
> But I'd be drawn and quartered
> If I could keep you in my bed
> I can't break this spell
> I know the trouble that I'm in
> But if I got out of the mouth of hell
> I'd walk right back in
> (Harris, "I Don't Want to Talk About It Now,"2000)

The darker portrayals of relentless sexual desires captured by Smith and Harris offer a stark contrast to Jordan's erotic vision of mutual pleasing and sensitivity. Psychoanalyst and feminist theorist, Jessica Benjamin, offers a more complex and dark representation of erotic attachments: "The other becomes the person who can give or withhold recognition, who can see what is hidden, can reach, conceivably

even violate the "core" of the other. The attribution of this power in erotic attachment may evoke awe, dread, admiration, or adoration, as well as humiliating or exhilarating submission." (1995, p.149). Benjamin continues:

> There is no erotic interaction without the sense of self and other exerting power, affecting each other, and such affecting is immediately elaborated in the unconscious in the more violent terms of infantile sexuality. But what makes sexuality erotic is the survival of the other through the survival of the other throughout the exercise of power….Eros unites us and in this sense overcomes the sense of otherness that that afflicts the self in relation to the world and its own body. But this transcendence is possible only when one simultaneously recognizes the separateness of some outside body in all its particular sensuality, with all its particular differences. (1995, p.205-206)

We give the other, in our erotic bonds, the opportunity, the power to know us in the most essential ways, and in that knowing to unsettle, disappoint and sometimes hurt us. We struggle to come to know the other as different from us and in that differentness find an object of excitement. Desire, vulnerability, aggression and conflict are continually intertwined. The willingness and capacity for surrender to one's own body, to one's desires, in a passionate embrace of another (and the other's otherness) is at the heart of the sexuality I believe to be the core of Reich's work.

Massive Orienting Passions

More than two decades ago Dorothy Dinnerstein was challenging the impact of traditional gender arrangements in child care, which she argued was maiming the emotional health of our children and straining and often crippling our erotic capacities as adult lovers:

> Our most fleeting and local sensations are shot through with thoughts and feelings in which a long past and a long future, and a deep wide now, are represented. ...But our sexuality [as humans] is also characterized by another peculiarity, one that is central for the project of changing or gender arrangements: *It resonates, more literally than any other part of our experience, with the massive orienting passions that first take shape in pre-verbal, pre-rational human infancy.* (pp. 14-15, emphasis in the original)

Dinnerstein continues:

> For this question, the crucial fact is that the feeling, the vital emotional intercourse, between infant and parent is carried by touch, by taste and smell, by facial expression and gesture, and by mutual accommodations of body position. Until the sexual impulse that emerges at puberty throws us once more into acute, physiologically urgent need for contact with the body of another person, life offers us no comparable avenue for direct expression of those feelings which

> are continuous with the feelings of infancy, feelings for which we then had no words, no language-dominated thoughts, and which cannot be rediscovered in their original fullness except in touch, in taste and smell, in facial expression and gesture, and in mutual accommodation of body position. (p.31)

The "massive orienting passions" that underlie our love and gender arrangements, our sensual and sexual experiences. A DEEP WIDE NOW. *Massive orienting passions.* That interplay of passionate sensation and memory, of resonance and longing is exquisitely captured in Sharon Olds' poem, "My Father's Breasts":

> Their soft surface, the polished silk of the hair
> running down them delicately like
> water. I placed my cheek—once,
> perhaps—upon their firm shape,
> my ear pressed against the black
> charge of the heart within. At most
> once—yet when I think of my father
> I think of his breasts, my head resting
> on his fragrant chest, as if I had spent
> hours, years, in that smell of black pepper and
> turned earth. (1984, p. 43)

The force of human sexuality. A DEEP WIDE NOW: drenched, submerged in infantile fantasies, enthralled in the moment, flung back into past, only to be thrust forward into future, wrenched with hope, desire, vulnerability. Essential to both the disturbance and the excitement of our erotic desires is the simultaneous evocation of the infantile underpinnings of our somatic/emotional experiences as well as the force and complexity of adult love and passion. This single poem of Olds could be the subject of an essay in its own right. She reminds us, in the midst of the mother/infant metaphors and models permeating the current therapeutic literature, that the father in his presence and absence is an inevitable force in psychic development.

Dinnerstein's writing offers a startling and enlivening contrast to de-eroticized and sanitized language. She captures the heat and the anxiety, as well as the warmth and caring, in the passions of our infantile attachments and longings, in our massive orienting passions. I am reminded of Dimen's question to some of her psychoanalytic colleagues' writings on sexuality, "What happened to the heat?" (1999, p.419). There is heat in adult erotic passions. These are not quiet waters.

Joyce McDougall's writing often enters the unquiet waters of adult sexuality, infused with ageless desires and conflicts. She writes, "I learned that the terrors of dissolving, of losing one's bodily limits or sense of self, of exploding into another or being invaded and imploded by another, were both frequent and revealing of the buried links to archaic sexual and love feelings originating in earliest infancy." (1995, p.xvi).

These impassioned desires and fears, infused with the force of adult body, emerge and re-emerge with relentless (ruthless, as Winnicott would say) vitality in our adult erotic relations and in the transference-countertransference dynamics of in-depth psychotherapy. To enter the realms of the erotic within the therapeutic relationship, to enter fully into adult sexual relations, one invites the full force of life's vicissitudes, replete with fantasy, idealization, disappointment, frustration, aggression, excitement, and unpredictability. This is complex and disturbing territory -- territory that I would suggest that client and therapist often collude to avoid.

Clients often enter psychotherapy seeking compensation for their childhood and relational wounds, wishing for an idealized, healing relationship provided by an understanding and near-perfect parent substitute. There can be a place such an arrangement, but I would argue that sweetness and idealization in a therapeutic relationship are not sufficient if one seeks the capacity for passionate attachments.

Mature adult relations are not safe and predictable. Mann observes that "it is not in the nature of the erotic to be cozy" (1997, p.18). Bataille's elaborates:

> The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives. Stripping naked is the decisive action. Nakedness offers a contrast to self-possession, to discontinuous existence, in other words. It is a state of communication revealing a quest for possible continuence of being beyond the confines of the self. Bodies open out to a state of continuity through secret channels that give us a feeling of obscenity. Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognized and stable individuality. (1986, pp. 17-18)

The erotic is invasive, naked, contagious with the desire to be taken over. One wonders with the other, who is doing what to whom? Lucinda Williams (2000), in her song "Essence," portrays this desire in straightforward language:

> Baby, sweet baby, kiss me hard
> Make me wonder who's in charge
>
> Baby, sweet baby, can't get enough
> Please come find me and help me get fucked up

The erotic is often messy. A mature therapeutic relationship must also have the capacity to be messy.

In an essay on lust, Dimen exults in the "messiness" of intimacy both in the psychoanalytic process and in sex, …"intimacy, relatedness, and warmth as well as complexity, confusion, and the half-lights of bodies and minds growing into and out of each other—a viny, complicated mess…."(1999, p.430). Dimen continues:

> Way down deep, *Lust* means not the conclusion of discharge but the penultimate moment of peak excitement when being excited is both enough and not enough, when each rise in excitement is, paradoxically, satisfying. Orgiastic. I would not want to do without orgasm—catharsis—myself. But isn't the pleasure of *Lust* equally central? A need calling for satisfaction, a satisfaction becoming a thrilling need? An excitement whose gratification is simultaneously exciting? (1999, p.431)

In a similarly evocative essay on eroticism, Ruth Stein (1998) writes that "eroticism in its vehemence and irrationality may seem monstrous, or at least unintelligible" (p.257), describing eroticism as a means "for carrying us beyond the toll of our separate individuality: it 'undoes' us" (p.255), and which "responds to and expresses the need for magic, for overstepping one's boundaries, for endowing one's sensuality and profound corporeality with meaning, a meaning that is both clarifying and mystifying…" (p.266).

Erotic Contagion: Transference and Countertransference

The experience of erotic transference and countertransference is an undoing, the force and forms of adult desires emerging from the shadow of disowned, disavowed and disorganizing longings.

When we enter the realms of the erotic with our clients, do we court disaster or invite possibility? Do we dance on a knife blade edge between the two? Do we allow the forces of erotic desire and fantasy to push against the familiar, established order of therapeutic limits? What is the nature of erotic transference? What is there to be gained for the client? The erotic is inherently contagious. It creates the confusions of desire: "Whose feelings are these? Who started it? Who are you to me? Who am I to you? Where are the boundaries between desire and action?"" The erotic moves not only the client but also the therapist into realms of ambiguity, ambivalence, excitement, anxiety and disgust. How can this be good for anyone? How do I contain and use my erotic countertransference as a source of information rather than a means of contagion?

Davies observes that "psychoanalysts have contorted themselves, their patients, and their understanding of the psychoanalytic process in an attempt to minimize, disavow, project and pathologize the sexual feelings that emerge between the analytic couple in the course of their emotionally powerful and most intimate encounter with each other" (1998, p.747). She sees this anxiety as rooted in the fears and prohibitions of sexual acting out between therapist and client and as fostered by the lack of any intelligently articulated theory of the "nature of normal adult sexuality and its manifestations in clinical practice" (p.751). She argues that a sexual (I would say erotic) aliveness is inherent and healthy in the later stages of an in-depth therapy. She argues that these concomitant feelings of aliveness and

attraction are not to be avoided, lived in silence, or eliminated through clinical consultation but are to be welcomed and examined.

Mann, too, defines psychotherapy as an erotic relationship, in which the force of the erotic is a primary means for growth and change:

> …it is my proposition that the emergence of the erotic transference signifies the patient's deepest wish for growth. …Through the erotic, light is shone on the deepest recesses of the psyche. …The development of the erotic transference is a major transitional stage in which the repetitive and transformational desire of the patient's unconscious meet at a passionate junction. The heart of the unconscious is visible in all its 'elemental passion', and in so opening allows for the prospect of transformation and psychic growth. (1997, pp.9-10)

My clinical experience mirrors the positions articulated by Mann and Davies. The understanding of erotic fantasy and transference/countertransference extends and deepens the therapeutic work with the body itself. The erotic needs to be welcomed and explored, not ignored and not acted out.

It is important to clarify the difference between *erotic* transference and an *eroticized* transference (Gorkin, 1984; Bolognini, 1994; Mann, 1997; Bonasia, 2001). To speak of an eroticized transference is to speak of the defensive use of sexuality and the erotic. In an eroticized transference, the feelings do not emerge within the developing and deepening relationship, they are imposed upon it. The eroticized transference is typically an idealized transference which forecloses deepening and seeks to defensively ward off conflict and loss. There is typically an overt or covert demand for the therapist to validate and reciprocate these feelings. The eroticized transference is one-sided, from the client to the therapist, and while a therapist may become enmeshed in this kind of transferential conundrum, this is not a transference that evokes delight and affection in the therapist. An eroticized countertransference is equally one-sided, now serving the narcissistic needs of the therapist and imposed upon the client.

In working within the erotic transference/countertransference matrix, I am not advocating for the therapist's direct disclosure of sexual or erotic feelings to the client (although Davies does). I have found consistently (I think without exception) that direct disclosure of my personal feelings of sexual interest or disinterest has trivialized the erotic space, foreclosing (at least temporarily) more complex and ambiguous territories of exploration. I am arguing for the therapist's making use of the erotic countertransference to recognize and understand what is becoming psychically and emotionally possible for the client within the therapeutic relationship. Erotic feelings and hopes arising within the transference are often attributed to the therapist ("You make me feel this way." "I've never been able to feel this toward anyone before."). The emergence of desire needs to be returned to the client.

The erotic transference/countertransference matrix is by no means all sweetness and light. The light of the erotic to which Mann refers as being shone into the deepest recesses of the psyche must often penetrate dark shadows and conflictual spaces within both client and therapist. Client and therapist are both likely to experience emotional and bodily turbulence, uncertainty and conflict. As Billow observes, "The analyst's passion, the capacity to feel both primitive and mature, like the patient's, cannot be legislated into existence or produced on command" (2000, p.418). The elements of an erotic countertransference may include the therapist's deadness, disinterest or disgust as well as attraction, tenderness or arousal. All of these reactions are signals that something is becoming possible within the client's erotic, somatic, and psychic life. In my clinical experience, it is rarely helpful for the therapist to simply disclosure such feelings to the client. The therapist needs to sit with these feelings, metabolize them, discover their meaning, so as to offer the client a kind of translation service for erotic vitality. The therapist's simply disclosing (not to mention acting out) erotic feelings likely forecloses exploration and understanding, derails the client's opportunity to take ownership of emergent desires. Bonasia states succinctly that "the analyst must 'sink into' the erotic fantasy without 'drowning' in it" (2001, p.260), also, I would add, without drowning the client in it either. For the erotic to remain open and alive, it is essential that the client not be an object of the therapist's ongoing desire and attraction, but of ongoing attention, curiosity and affection in the midst of the pleasures and passions of the therapeutic process.

Differentiation and Maturation

Mann observes that the erotic pulls us toward "greater differentiation and individuation, …to greater complexity and more diverse and complex structures" (1997, p.9). Here we have the distinction of the erotic pull into adult life and intimacy from that of the erotic being seen as the regressive pull of infantile longings and fusion fantasies. Work within the erotic transference matrix allows a gradual evolution from one's younger, wish-driven fantasies and desires to those that are more psychically substantial and differentiated. Within the play of erotic countertransference, there will be moments when a client suddenly emerges as an object of desire, arousal, excitement, hatred and/or disgust. These are not structures of relatedness but moments of intense recognition and opening.

In this regard, I have learned a great deal from Davies' articulation of function of the "postoedipal parent," described as "a parent whose object functions and self-experience are more grounded in the mutual recognition of experienced sexuality and intimate exchange and who must nourish and then set free the child's emergent sexuality" (1998, p.753). The therapeutic relationship, even in the midst of intensity and turbulence of erotic transference and countertransference, is not an end unto itself, but the means to finding love and life elsewhere. Davies continues, "Perhaps it is openly in our role as parents, or, in this case, as analysts, that we finally come to terms with what we can and cannot have – the haunting residues of

our own oedipal longing that we nourish in our children and then set free for someone else, some more appropriate lover, to enjoy" (p. 764).

In a similar and very poignant fashion, Bolognini describes this developmental and therapeutic accomplishment, switching from the voice of a therapist to that of a father:

> I have an idea of my own, which I shall express by an image: *every good father should at least dance a waltz with his daughter* and show himself to be thereby moved and honored. …In the same way, every father must be capable of standing aside at the appropriate time, so as not to impede the gradual process of separation during youth, after having protected and encouraged growth – until he symbolically accompanies her to the altar to hand her over to her real adult sexual companion. (1994, p.82)

The poet, Sharon Olds, writes of her children as she watches them mature, first of her daughter in, "For My Daughter":

> That night will come. Somewhere someone will be
> entering you, his body riding
> under your white body, dividing
> your blood from your skin, your dark, liquid
> eyes open or closed, the slipping
> silken hair of your head fine
> as water poured at night, the delicate
> threads between your legs curled
> like stitches broken. The center of your body
> will tear open, as a woman will rip the
> seam of her skirt so she can run. It will happen,
> and when it happens I will be right here
> in bed with your father, as when you learned to read
> you would go off and read in your room
> as I read in mine, versions of the story
> that changes in the telling, the story of the river.
> (1984, p.65)

We see again, as we saw in the poem to her son quoted earlier, that Olds does not shy away from the physicality of her children's lives, the sensuality of their developing bodies. Parental delight, love and anxiety intermingle in her reactions to these young, emerging bodies. Olds' erotic delight in her children does not take possession of them. Her delight throws them forward, outward into life, outward into the arms of others. She captures in these poems what I think Davies would characterize as post-oedipal love. As therapists in passionate involvement with our clients, we engage, wonder, uncover, confront, protect, encourage, accompany, delight, and then let go.

Dinnerstein speaks of the “long past” of our erotic passions, but she also invokes “the deep wide now” of our adult sexual relations. Green seems to suggest that the potential disturbances and uncertainties of that deep wide now, in the here and now of adult sexual relations, are often cause for defensive avoidance and retreat for client and therapist alike. I’ve been told that Bette Davis once said, “Growing old is not for sissies.” I would suggest that the same can often be said for making love. Davis makes her point pointedly, though “sissies” carries a disparaging connotation of the effeminate, the emasculated.

It would be difficult to speak of love any better than James Baldwin and Adrienne Rich already have. I quote Baldwin from **The Fire Next Time** first:

> Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word love here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace—not in the infantile American sense of being happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.

And Rich:

> An honorable human relationship -- that is, one in which two people have the right to use the word “love” -- is a process, delicate, violent, often terrifying to both persons involved, a process of refining the truths they can tell each other.
>
> It is important to do this because it breaks down human self-delusion and isolation.
>
> It is important to do this because in so doing we do justice to our own complexity.
>
> It is important to do this because we can count on so few to go that hard way with us. (1979, p.188)

The words of Baldwin and Rich are all the more compelling in that both are gay. It is one aspect of heterosexual privilege that one can take the right to be loved and to love for granted, heterosexual unions to be blessed and held sacred. This has not been so for gays and lesbians, especially at the times when Baldwin and Rich were writing these words. The efforts to love, in their lives, were acts of determination and honor.

It is in the nature of impassioned relations to excite, disturb, transgress. Sexual passion has to do with the capacity, the willingness, to be fully alive in one’s own body and with the body of another. Love and lust, at our best moments, when we don’t turn away from the heat of passions, come together to move us more fully to each other and into life. Within our erotic passions are a multitude of desires--pleasant and unpleasant, regressive and progressive, soothing and demanding. Here is both the hard work and the excitement of love and of

lovemaking. In the heat of our erotic passions, we need the other, we want the other, we wish to be wanted, desired, to be taken up, to be tender, to be unrelenting. We face the other, we face ourselves, we hate the other, we overcome the other, we are overcome by the other, familiar gender roles and orientations begin to blur. We are simultaneously thrown backward and forward in time. We are excited and disturbed. We lust and we love.

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