

# Yearning in flesh and spirit

*When we yearn to know another, rather than use another, love becomes holy.*

Vern Barnet

**A** friend says that spiritual yearning is utterly different from sexual desire. I disagree. I remind him that scripture says *God is love (1 John 4:8), and that marriage, one result of yearning, “signifies to us the mystery of the union between Christ and his Church . . .” (Book of Common Prayer p423).*

Our secular culture has a difficult time affirming that sexual union is analogous to the experience of God. While the eroticism of the Song of Solomon is clear, many Christians are at least faintly embarrassed by the book and some interpret the fleshy language as mere ecclesiastic metaphor.

Our understanding of marriage has developed since the 1552 Book of Common Prayer which justified marriage in the first place for “the procreation of children.” The 1979 Book of Common Prayer gives “mutual joy” as the first reason for marriage. The recent Supreme Court decision about same-sex marriage seems to be more aligned with the latter view of marriage.

Augustine of Hippo was surely right to condemn sensual love when it is selfish, but wrong to think that being “turned on” is sin. He seems to have approved of sex only as a rational activity to produce children. Perhaps the Persian poet Rumi was closer to the mark when he writes, “The throbbing vein will take you further than any thinking.”

Desiring the use of another for one’s own

pleasure is hardly praiseworthy, but the throbbing to know another intimately may indeed be holy. For some, such yearning is best fulfilled in celibate service or circumstance. For others, the erotic commitment opens a dedicated path to God.

All faiths recognize the danger of love because it, like a white-hot iron bar in a sweltering forge, can sear body and soul. But that intense fire can also meld souls in knowledge so intimate we call it union. This knowledge is not rational information, but the transcendent ecstasy about which the mystics wrote.

The arts, perhaps better than theology, express the holiness of desire. Here are three examples which, to me, show that knowing another, like knowing God, can happen only when we empty ourselves of the desire to use another for our own pleasure, and instead, leaving aside our agendas, seek simply to know the other.

## 1. A Sculpture of Desire

Of Christian art, surely one of the most daring works is Bernini’s 1652 sculpture, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, in



Bernini’s *Transverberazione di santa Teresa d’Avila (The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa)*

the Cornaro Chapel of Santa Maria della Vittoria in Rome. She is presented voluptuously as the angel above her aims his arrow. She twists and quivers as if in orgasm. Here is a passage from her autobiography:

“I saw in [the angel’s] hand a long spear of gold, and at the

iron’s point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart, and to pierce my very entrails...and to leave me all on fire with a great love of God. The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive

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pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it. The soul is satisfied now with nothing less than God.”

Her yearning was not to use God, but to know God. Similarly, it seems entirely appropriate to me that lovers should, in the fire of their embrace, shout “O God!” When we behold, rather than use, desire is purified of selfish intent and we are emptied so God may fill us.

## 2. A Dance of Desire

Some years ago I visited Spain where a young friend, a guitarist, was studying. I told him I wanted to see real flamenco, not the touristy delights with castanets, but the traditional ecstatic wail of desire.

We met in Madrid past midnight. We passed though a restaurant still busy with customers into an unmarked back room. While some men were singing and others playing guitars, a woman was dancing a mature embrace of both desire and desolation. The crowd was lifted into religious rapture with shouts of “Al-lay!” and I recognized the Andalusian pronunciation of the Muslim term for God, Allah. Does she dance of a human or the divine Lover?

Few art forms are so clearly indebted to so many religions as flamenco. The

hand gestures arise from Hindu dance, and the cante, the song, is a rich reminder of Jewish, early Christian, Arabic, and gypsy scales and rhythms.

At my side my guitarist friend whispered, “Blues and flamenco are both born in pain.” As slavery and freedom both dwell in that American art form, I see the yearning and satisfaction that shape flamenco. Somehow this art, like faith, transforms brokenness and disappointment into praise. The yearning of the lover for the beloved, from a distance or in the closest moment of ravished release, exposes the realm of the sacred to be known, but not used.

## 3. A Poem of Desire

John Donne was Dean of St. Paul’s Cathedral in London, 1621-1631. His lines, “No man is an island” and “Never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee” are often quoted, as is his sonnet beginning “Death, be not proud.” His poem, *The Canonization*, argues that intensely committed lovers should be considered saints.

Donne’s most paradoxical and profound expression of desire is *Holy Sonnet XIV*, perhaps written when he was agonizing about converting to the Church of England.

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Batter my heart, three-person’d God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o’erthrow me, and bend  
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.  
I, like an usurp’d town to another due,  
Labor to admit you, but oh, to no end;  
Reason, your viceroy in me, me should defend,  
But is captiv’d, and proves weak or untrue.  
Yet dearly I love you, and would be lov’d fain,  
But am betroth’d unto your enemy;  
Divorce me, untie or break that knot again,  
Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.

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In this sonnet, God is Trinity, blacksmith, glass-blower, battle chief - and molester. The very first word, *batter*, is a problem because we know how utterly wrong battering is. Donne is first a city under siege and then a partner desiring a different lover. The sonnet climaxes by uniting what we think as opposites: chastity and rape. The logic is shocking and irresistible, at once both sacrilegious and unassailably pure. Abandoning all desires to use God, Donne wants only to know and be possessed by God.

The sonnet’s sexual language parallels our spiritual yearning to behold rather than to use, as the movements of the dance and the undulation of the sculpture also suggest.

The technicolor terms “passion” and “rapture” should not have their beauty reduced to monochrome in theology. The Passion of Christ is indeed the utmost act of love, and the Rapture is a union with God beyond comprehension.

A child’s wonder and curiosity to know the world, if unthwarted, opens to God. And when adults cease from using one another and simply behold the world and the beloved as an unmerited gift, an intimation of heavenly bliss appears. I ask my friend, Is not such love a profound mystery taught and cherished, the Church? +

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