

## **Sexual Autobiography: Nicole Thweatt**

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My earliest introduction to the concept of sex and sexuality is quite clear and vivid, as many of my early lessons surrounding sex would ultimately be. The foundation set for me at the tiny age of 2 or 3 years old was one of fascination, but also confusion and shame. One evening as I played underneath the end table beside the couch, a woman appeared on screen in the film my parents and teenaged older siblings were watching on television. She was standing in a dark colored robe and let the robe fall to the floor, revealing her bare breasts. I did not remember ever seeing a naked woman on television before, but even more surprising was the man in the scene. Fully dressed himself, but reaching out to touch the woman's exposed flesh. I sat beneath the table in rapt attention until someone called out, "Hey! Why are you looking at that?" Laughter seemed to explode from everywhere in the room while tears of guilt filled my eyes. If I was eventually comforted, I do not recall. The only sentiment that lingered was the sense that I had done something very wrong. My later sexual messages would echo this sentiment over and over again, replaying the cycle of wonder and fascination eventually leading to turmoil. It is only in very recent years that I have begun to unwind the knots in my own psyche surrounding sex and my relationship to it.

## **Sexual Legacies & Rules**

### **Sexual communication**

It is also worth noting that the age gap between myself and my sister is 17 years, making her more of a maternal figure for the first half of my life, and there are 14 years between myself and my older brother. His protectiveness of me made it so that he would have never voluntarily viewed me as a sexual being, and to this day he is still awkward around the topic of intimacy if it ever comes up in our

conversations. The youngest child is 3 years behind me in age and so we share a much more common worldview, but being male meant that we had very little to talk about regarding sex until we were both much, much older. It was not so much that the topic was taboo in my family, but only that there was never anyone truly appropriate to talk to.

When it came to communication with my parents, there was very little information offered regarding the act of sex, though we received a good deal of education on sexual reproduction from my mother fairly early on. My mother is a very intelligent, well-spoken woman, and she has never shied away from our questions about any topic. However, only when we were small and innocent did I personally feel comfortable asking any questions. I knew both from my mother's explanations, and unfettered access to the Learning Channel, exactly where babies came from (in a scientific sense) by the time I was in kindergarten. At that age, however, I still did not know how sperm came to be in a woman's womb in the first place. I had ideations of sperm swimming down a woman's throat when a man kissed her, and I remember proudly delivering this newfound understanding to my parents one evening over dinner. They responded with playfully mocking laughter but no clarification, and so I simply thought myself very clever and believed my own imaginings for some time.

### **Education and joking**

I would eventually unravel the great mystery for myself when I was 8 years old, by reading every sex-related entry in the entire 32 volume Encyclopedia Britannica. From this I learned about the process of puberty and the development of secondary sex characteristics, signs of arousal, vaginal penetration, sexual diseases and disorders, male and female sexual dysfunction and therapeutic techniques for stimulating erection and orgasm, along with some other less-exciting information. This self-directed study was prompted by a fluke exposure to softcore pornography at my neighbor's house, while our little brothers were playing with bugs outside and her mother was smoking cigarettes downstairs in the

kitchen. Up until that point, I had never seen sexual intimacy before my own eyes. However, a series of incidents years before with a slightly older male cousin had enlightened me to the notion that two people could take pleasure from taking off clothes and pressing body parts together. Still, I was confused by the mechanics I saw simulated on screen. Some of the positioning of the actors didn't compute to my childish mind, but the encyclopedia answered all of my questions with detailed illustrations.

Though I found myself with a wealth of secret knowledge suddenly, I was very quiet about sex from that point forward. No one ever knew exactly what I was privy to, and in the rare instance when sexual jokes or innuendo were spoken in my presence I would pretend to either not hear it or not understand. I kept up this faux naiveté for years, and did not allow so much as a perverse joke or phrase to exit my mouth until I was well into my teens. Even then, it was never, ever around my family. Having too much information had caused me to become an exceptionally sneaky child.

In all likelihood, the sneakiness may have started with the incident with my cousin. Starting from the time I was 4 years old and for a couple of years afterwards, whenever we would be left alone together he would initiate certain "games." When maternal instinct led my mother to the room where we were playing one day and she found us emerging from a closet together, she took me into a private space and asked me to tell her what had been going on. After denying any wrongdoing for what seemed to be a very long time, I finally burst into tears and confession. What my cousin had been doing to me, and what he had asked me to do, was so incredibly shameful to me not because it had occurred but because "I was doing it with him." These are the exact words I spoke to my mother and they have replayed in my mind countless times over the years. Whenever I have recalled either the incidents or the resulting conversation with my mother I would be overcome with grief for which I had no words. I felt that I was a disgusting and awful person that did not deserve to exist. I would do my best to push

these thoughts and feelings away, trying all I could think of to put the memories out of my mind, and so it stands to reason that I would not want to voluntarily speak on it ever again. Over the years I was able to talk things through with my first lover without judgment, and later learned from very close friends that these kinds of situations are not uncommon, but in my family it was never spoken of again. I attempted to touch on the subject on a couple of occasions after age 30, but my mother now pretends not to remember and I can't decide if that is a good thing or a bad thing.

I think that not wanting to “remind” my mother of the incident kept me from ever addressing or acknowledging anything to do with physical sexual intimacy. It was only in my childish ignorance about the connection between sexual activities and sexual reproduction that allowed me to openly ask questions pertaining to the latter. Once the connection was understood in my own mind, I immediately relegated even reproduction to the realm of secrets.

### **Nakedness and privacy**

In a similar way, I had at first made no connection between nakedness and sex. As a child it's rare to give any thought to nudity until the moment you are instructed to think differently about naked bodies. This lesson came at an age when I was still often romping around the house in only underwear, still occasionally being showered alongside my mother, or bathed in the same tub with my baby brother. My father thought nothing of getting dressed for work in my presence, my older sister would frequently take me to the bathroom and help me onto the toilet. Couple this with a complete lack of exposure to anything indecent on television, and I had no reason to feel there was anything wrong with naked bodies. I had never witnessed sexual intimacy and would not have understood it if I did, and so I enjoyed all of the innocence of youth. This is why I was staring at the love scene in the movie. I didn't yet know I wasn't “supposed to” look. I had been given no prior reason to think of nakedness as something to keep private.

There is a home video taken of me at 4 years old and I am closing the bathroom door against the viewer saying, "I've got to have some privacy," while my mother chuckles from behind the camera. It's obvious from this interaction that the concept of privacy had been mentioned at least, and that I had a basic understanding of its place and meaning, but later in the same series of home movies there is footage of my brother and I in the tub splashing in the soapy water. Privacy was an understood concept, but clearly not one that I or anyone else took terribly seriously.

In my family we didn't even sleep alone. My older siblings, of a different marriage and even a different generation, had been raised in a more societally standard fashion. That is to say, they slept in cribs as infants, and in toddler beds later on, never spending more than the occasional night in my mother's bed and then only for sickness or emotional distress. My younger brother and I, on the other hand, slept beside or between both my mother and my father nearly every night until I was 12. That was the age when I began to feel self-conscious about my own body and uncomfortable being seen in any state of undress, and so began to sleep in my own room instead. Much to my parents' glee, my brother followed suit and began to sleep in his room shortly thereafter. They had never intended to have grown children in their bed but had been unable to get rid of us after deciding to co-sleep during our infancies. When I began to sleep in my own bed, and close my bedroom door while I changed my clothes, this was respected without question.

My parents had been given no such respect for all those years prior, and on the rare occasion they turned my brother and I away and locked their bedroom door, they could be expected to meet with wailing cries from the hallway because our young minds simply could not conceive of any reason we should be barred entry. Their door was almost always open, at most only shut partially so my parents could change their clothes.

This complete lack of boundaries is actually what led to the next uncomfortable sexual revelation for me, at around age 6. One night my parents had declared we would sleep in our own rooms, but being unable to find comfort without them I took it upon myself to sneak back in while no one was watching. I nestled beneath a bit of laundry on the floor in a corner, and was horrified to eventually overhear the sounds of my parents' lovemaking. I use the word "horrified" without a shred of exaggeration. I was truly frozen in a state of terror and only when I thought I might die from distress did I call out for my mother. She rushed to the clothes pile and found me sobbing and hysterical, and comforted me while my father cursed under his breath and made a sizeable display of aggravation. I understood absolutely none of this and to this day my stomach turns in knots at the recollection, despite now understanding quite well. From that point forward I feared my parent's closed door. Even now, well into my 30's, I become very uncomfortable if my parents' bedroom door is shut tight, because even now they only ever close the door when they intend to be intimate.

### **Physical affection**

I do not remember any physical affection between my parents. It's entirely likely that I was simply caught in my own little world and was paying them no real mind, but even now it's quite uncommon and noteworthy to see my mother stroke my father's hair, or to see him embrace her. My parents and my grandmothers were very affectionate with me, often hugging and holding me, allowing me to sit on their laps, or carrying me around in their arms, but they didn't seem to touch each other very often.

My older brother's main display of affection generally involved picking me up and tossing me into a closet and then barring my exit from the other side, but he was also known to toss me onto my parents bed instead so I would bounce, or let me climb on his back for a piggyback ride. One could say that his signs of physical "affection" tended to be very aggressive, even if not particularly harmful.

My older sister was very maternal with me and our younger brother, but she had a peculiar habit of kissing on the lips to say hello or goodbye. The only reason I found it peculiar is because no one else in our family had ever done so, and I initially found it to be very special and intimate. One day, as I got older, I stopped wanting to kiss my sister on the lips and instead started offering her my cheek. That is the only time I remember actively rejecting any form of physical affection from any family member, though I did slowly begin to develop a deep anxiety around giving or receiving physical affection from anyone as I moved through my teen years.

My first boyfriend is due all of the credit in this matter, as he had become very abusive over the course of our relationship and would become particularly enraged at the idea of anyone else being physically intimate with me. He would often become angry with me for hugging my brother or male cousin, or even for spending too much close time with female friends. It's entirely possible that I internalized his paranoia and so shied away from any physical contact with others so as not to upset him. I believe this has had very lasting effects as I am still wary of most physical contact to this day.

It's not that I don't desire physical contact and affection, it's actually much to the contrary. I am actually a very physically affectionate person. I enjoy cuddling and hugs, I like to stroke my loved one's hair, kiss their cheeks and foreheads, or gently tickle them as a playful gesture. I want to be hugged and squeezed and kissed and cuddled, but it is only with my child and in romantic relationships that I ever allow that for myself. With almost everyone else I am often afraid to touch or be touched and am presently working through this issue privately. It hasn't created any noteworthy dysfunction in any area of my life, but I do sometimes long for the physical affection I often deny myself.

I am still kissed on the forehead by my mother regularly, and embraced tightly by my father to this day. My siblings and good friends will embrace me as a greeting. Still, I will sometimes startle at a surprise touch. Occasionally before giving or receiving a hug I will have a moment of panic, and there is

always an undercurrent of awkwardness no matter how pleasant of a relationship we have. This is even sometimes the case in my romantic partnership, with my partner noting that I only seem to fully accept his affection when I'm half-asleep.

### **Sexual affection**

I was not privy to any forms or displays of sexual affection growing up. I saw my parents kiss firmly on the mouth exactly once, and can't even remember ever seeing them share a quick peck upon departure. I was not allowed to watch a lot of romantic television or movies so I didn't have any early media examples to follow either. It was only by the secret acquisition of tiny tidbits here and there that I developed a prototype blueprint for sexual affection. It was not until my first relationship that I had the opportunity to put my ideas into practice, but it's hard to distinguish what was organically developed and what had been guided, as my first real relationship was with a boy 3 years my senior who had a wealth of sexual experience "under his belt." Over the course of my relationship with him I gradually discovered my own style of giving and receiving sexual affection and became very comfortable and confident quite quickly, but things shifted firmly and swiftly when I entered into my second relationship. My son's father ran extremely hot and cold at the time, and often rejected my displays of sexual affection unless they were directly linked to genital stimulation. In the span of one year I came to second-guess all of my affectionate expressions and the trend has continued from that time forward.

### **Sexual boundaries**

Though we were given the obligatory speech about not letting strangers see or touch our private parts, there wasn't any talk of sexual boundaries in a way that would translate into my adult behaviors. There was no talk of sex in my household at all really, and very little useful talk of sex among my peers, so I didn't realize the need for concrete sexual boundaries until my unspoken boundaries were being breached for the first time in my mid-twenties. I had lost my virginity to a boy who, at the time, treated

me with a great deal of gentleness. There wasn't much need for sexual boundaries because anything that I was uncomfortable with was simply not done, and otherwise absolutely anything could happen. My next relationship was quite safe in that regard as well. I was declaring sexual boundaries without having to make them very explicit, because my lovers were sexually respectful and responsive to me without being asked. For example, I did not and do not enjoy performing fellatio or coming into oral contact with seminal fluids. It is something that has always somewhat repulsed me for whatever reason, but my first two lovers did not attempt to force me to do so. It was only in a much later relationship that I first fell victim to undue pressure, manipulation, and coercion to engage in unwanted sexual acts and submit to sexually abusive behaviors. It took several years before I felt secure enough to demand respect for my sexual boundaries, and as soon as I did that relationship began to dissolve.

### **Clothing & Modesty**

I tend to believe that one of the reasons I never had to verbally articulate sexual boundaries growing up is because I had always dressed fairly modestly. The young men in my age group were not particularly interested and so I never received much sexual attention growing up. I was expected to dress modestly and was not given access to clothing that was overtly suggestive, and I didn't begin to develop any secondary sex characteristics until I was in high school so even with less modest clothing on my body there simply wasn't very much to see. I was not terribly attractive by societal standards and so almost no one attempted to breach any of my boundaries. One could say I simply did not give off any signs of sexual availability. All of my clothing was very age appropriate in cut and style, though I did own some two-piece bathing suits, above the knee skirts, and objectively short shorts, all made for young girls. I couldn't fit the standard sizes due to being very thin and so wore many children's items for a very long time and was often treated as a child by my peers.

There were no explicit rules surrounding dress and modesty in my household, but there was an unspoken understanding that I was not to attempt to dress like an adult when I was not yet an adult. The one idea that had been drilled into my head from very young was the concept of looking “too grown.” It almost never had anything to do with the clothing I was wearing or wanted to wear for all the aforementioned reasons, but instead focused on makeup and hairstyling. I was not allowed to wear my hair “out” or loosened from braids and ponytails until I was in high school. My father believed that little girls should not have loose flowing hair because it looked too mature. My mother did not allow me to wear any makeup or nail polish until I was in junior high school for similar reasons. I was also not allowed to shave my legs or pluck my eyebrows for a very long time, and was never given explicit permission. I simply began to do so in secret eventually and no one but my sister noticed or ever mentioned it.

### **Pornography**

As with many other adult topics, pornography wasn't often mentioned in my family except briefly and in relation to something going on in other households but not our own. It was going on in our household though, and this was revealed one day in my mid-teens when the family computer became infected by a virus and my mother discovered a great deal of pictures and videos in a folder on our hard drive. I had been viewing pornography regularly for quite a while by the time of the incident, but had enough knowledge of computers to delete any evidence. I always suspected the offending files had been acquired by my younger brother, but in hindsight it could have perhaps been my father, though he knew almost nothing about computers at all and I don't think he would have been able to navigate the internet well enough to find pornography even if he wanted to. My response to the sudden controversy was to simply assist in the computer clean up, and afterwards no one ever mentioned it again.

The truth was, once I learned the real mechanics of sexual intercourse I became insatiable for adult media, spending unnecessary amounts of time at my neighbor's house in hopes of watching unsupervised television, sneaking into the basement to flip through my sister's romance novels, and eventually (at age 12 when my house became wired to the internet) staying up late into the night to watch snippets of hardcore pornography. I eventually developed an addiction, but this would not happen until I had begun dorming in my first year of college and gained unrestricted access to my own computer and long stretches of uninterrupted privacy.

### **Masturbation**

Regarding privacy, as I mentioned before there was very little. I often closed my bedroom door at night, but there would never be a lock on that door for the entirety of my time in my family home. Masturbation was often difficult to accomplish. Still, from the time I was in elementary school I found ways and times to engage with my own body, but always operating in the utmost secrecy. I achieved my first orgasm as a teenager in complete silence for fear of being discovered, and for many years I could not orgasm with a partner because of that deeply ingrained embarrassment at my own involuntary sexual functions. There really was never any indication that masturbation was taboo or forbidden, but it was another one of those matters that no one spoke about or acknowledged and so I followed suit. I remember my brother asking my mother about masturbation once when he was a younger adolescent and she told him that it meant touching your own private parts. No further information requested or offered. To this day I have no idea what anyone in my family of origin thinks about masturbation, and I am content to leave it as such.

### **Ethnic Influence**

It's possible that the lack of communication about sex follows the pattern of other families of my background, but it's difficult to attribute very many aspects of my growing up to ethnicity. Even though

we are a Black American family, both sides of my lineage are so ethnically diverse that there are no hard and fast protocols surrounding ethnic expression. We've always seemed to operate in a way that was slightly different from other families no matter the race or nationality, while still having many similarities as well. In addition to being an ethnic amalgamation, both of my parents were born and raised in New York City where the mingling of cultures was prevalent even in the 1950s. I believe they created a true melting-pot scenario and it's hard to determine what came from where. Very little about my upbringing could be said to be purely "Black," though as I've gotten older I clearly see the threads of African American culture highlighted in the tapestry of how I was raised. These aspects tend to be more incidental, such as the kind of music played at family barbecues and how children ought to speak to their elders. Rules and messages surrounding sexuality vary from household to household in the Black community, with some families being open and honest to the point of being explicit, and others being disastrously quiet about any and everything relating to sexual development.

### **Early Sexual Messages**

#### **Puberty**

When I was small my mother spoke very frankly about our eventual physical maturation and always ensured we had access to educational books and materials, but as the time came for me to start actually entering puberty the conversation had already died out entirely. I delivered a series of very aggressive hints that I wanted my first bra and my mother laughed at me and outright refused, saying that I didn't need one. To be fair she was absolutely right, but her handling of the situation was something I found deeply disappointing and it left me somewhat ashamed. When, several years later, I found myself wishing for a bra to keep my budding breasts invisible under my school clothes, I was afraid to ask her. She eventually noticed my development and remarked very jokingly, but it made me

so uncomfortable that I'm sure I barely acknowledged her comment. I was about 13 years old at that point, and shortly thereafter my sister came to pick me up for the weekend at her apartment. The official reason was to take me to get my hair professionally straightened for the first time, since I was starting high school. My sister, at that time having just turned 30, was someone I had a much easier time being transparent with, so as we got our nails done at the salon I tiptoed around the topic of being uncomfortable in my shirts. She asked me directly if I wanted to go shopping for a bra and I all but breathed a sigh of relief. What we ended up buying was a glorified undershirt in the shape of a bra, but it performed its intended purpose and made me feel quite grown up for the first time. The next time my sister visited she brought over a couple more styles and continued to supply my brassieres until I was old enough to pick out my own.

My mother was a bit more hands-on when it came to my menses, but only after the fact. I began to experience cramps at age 11, about 2 years before my period began, but my mother didn't acknowledge them as cramps. She treated them as if it were a generic stomach ache and treated me with a little bit of disdain when I complained about the pain. Once, after having to leave school early because of it, I overheard my paternal grandmother whisper to her that I was about to begin my "menstrations." My mother politely agreed with her but then shifted the conversation. By the time my menstrual cycle did finally begin I still had been given no access to supplies in preparation. I wasn't caught off guard by it, but it would have been easier for me if I had been equipped with a panty liner or pad for when the moment inevitably arrived, so that I could have avoided stuffing toilet paper in my panties at school.

On the day I noticed blood for the first time I texted my mother to let her know, and she simply replied with "Congratulations!" My response was, "This is no time to be celebrating," and I spent the rest of the afternoon dreading going home to face my mother. When I arrived she was waiting with a

box of pads and asked me if I had any questions. I didn't, so that was the end of our talk. She immediately started tracking my menses and would make sure I had money for pads every month, but eventually I worked up the nerve to ask if I could buy tampons. I had several friends whose mothers believed that using tampons would rob your virginity and forbade it, but my mother didn't mind at all and was actually almost disinterested. In fact, everyone in the household acted completely disinterested in my newfound womanhood. My mother had told my father at my request, but I don't remember him acknowledging it in any way. I would have been mortified if he did.

### **Major Sexual Influencers**

Now a woman with a working uterus, it was only natural that the idea of possible pregnancy would be at the forefront of my mind. I was not sexually active yet, but I was sexually mature and that meant something big as far as I was concerned. I had been waiting to get my period since I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. Though it would be 6 years before I could join the club, that year several girls in my class had started their menses, and many more than that were already wearing training bras. By 7<sup>th</sup> grade I knew two girls in my class who were sexually active. One had had sex 23 times with her boyfriend, who was a grown man in his mid-twenties. Another girl had had sex 14 times, with 14 different boys and men. I was fascinated, but not envious in any way. I had already determined to wait until I was "an older teen" to lose my virginity. I do not remember at any time in my life thinking that I would wait until I was married. It simply was not something I ever intended to do, even though many of my peers teased me about my prudishness and annoying "innocence." But I wasn't a prude, I was just private. And though I was physically innocent, I was looking forward to eventually becoming a participant in a sexual relationship. It just wasn't on the immediate itinerary for me, as being disinteresting to the opposite sex I had no real dating prospects. My sexual influences never came from my peers, and until I had a boyfriend of my own I didn't have any incentive to trade in theoretical sexual knowledge for something more practical.

## Dating & Sexual History

I had a handful of crushes in my life but none of them ever returned my affections and I had gotten used to outright rejection. It was as if no one of the opposite sex ever even noticed me, and if I put myself in their line of sight it would usually end in my being ridiculed. Needless to say, I had very low expectations. To my extreme surprise, the summer after I turned 13 I got my first “real boyfriend” and everyone in our peer circle of teenagers from the neighborhood was trying to instigate my first “real kiss” with the boy who lived around the block. These efforts were futile, however, because within a matter of days I decided that he was annoying and I made haste to break up with him. We had never done more than hold hands. It wasn’t that I was too nervous to finally take those first steps into romance, it was that I had never really wanted him to be my boyfriend in the first place. I only thought he was nice to look at, and nice to be around. The truth was, there was another boy who made me feel something that surpassed a crush by miles.

At the time I was beginning to become especially close to the boy who lived 2 houses down. He was 3 years older than me and no one understood why he was offering me so much of his attention. I didn’t understand it either, but I didn’t mind it in the least. We talked to each other about everything, he trusted me with his secrets, I trusted him with mine, and we started to build a small world around the two of us. At any available opportunity, we were together. I stopped spending time with everyone else if he was at home, because the only place I wanted to be was where he was. Over the course of more than a year, through two bitter, frigid winters and one sweltering summer, we fell in love. By the second spring it was obvious to us both that we weren’t content to just be friends, and in the spring of my 15<sup>th</sup> year we shared our first kiss. It was my first real, desired kiss, and it knocked my knees from under me. He had to catch me in his arms, and laugh at my silliness.

I had never been happier in my entire life, but our relationship was wrought with controversy. He was nearly 18 when we began officially dating, and my father was livid. It seemed like everyone in the entire world felt that I had no business being with him, but that only reinforced my attachment. He became the only person I could trust. For a long while, he was the only thing that mattered to me.

Part of my unhealthy attachment was due to my decision to offer him my virginity not 2 months after we became a couple. Things escalated quickly from first kiss to fondling and eventually he offered to perform oral sex on me. I was incredibly nervous about the prospect but once he had done it, I felt there was really nothing left for me to hide from him. He had been up close and personal with the most personal part of me. Shortly thereafter, I offered to let him go all the way. He actually refused, pointing out that he would be 18 soon and it was illegal. I talked him into it. I told him that we would just keep it a secret and that I didn't care if other people assumed he was cheating on me, we would just pretend that I was still a virgin. That summer I lost my virginity in a half-built tool shed being erected in his backyard. I was 15.

In hindsight there are many aspects of my story that are horrific, but none of them hold anything but very pleasant memories for me. It was only the things that came later that would haunt me and create dysfunction. It was the possessiveness he began to display, his controlling nature and the way he dictated who I could and should not be close to. It was the physical violence that our arguments would escalate to every time he descended into paranoia, or I descended into insecurity. It was the way we kept destroying each other but refused to let go, even going so far as to get engaged just so that the other one could never leave. He purchased a small  $\frac{1}{4}$  carat diamond solitaire for my 17 year old finger, in hopes that it would secure me to him forever. But I was growing up in spite of his wishes to keep me young and dependent on him, and we were growing apart, and neither of us could stand the thought of our relationship coming to an end. Almost as if in answer to those secret wishes, without intending to,

we got pregnant. I was in my first year of college and he had just started working as an EMT for the FDNY. In my mind, the circumstances weren't ideal but we would make it. Suddenly confronted by the reality of our future together, he wanted me to get an abortion.

For the next 6 weeks I cried and begged and pleaded with him to stay with me, and I spiraled into suicidal depression. All the while my parents were trying to convince me to have an abortion too. In the end I would acquiesce, and proceed to fight my way through several more years of depression until I became pregnant for the 2<sup>nd</sup> time at age 20, one and a half years into my next romantic relationship.

### **Spirituality of Sexuality**

#### **Family legacy**

I can't speak to my father's spiritual perspectives on sex and sexuality because he has never made them apparent to me. My father is a good example of what a man should be and what I should look for in a partner in many ways, but because his alcohol addiction in my early years created so much familial dysfunction, I still walked away with some incorrect messaging about what to expect from men I was in relationship with. This is not so much related to sex as it is romance, and respect, and safety. Still, in spite of his flaws, he always demonstrated a deep desire to protect me and keep me safe. Even when I disappointed him by becoming pregnant in college, twice, he was always very accepting and supportive of me and never left me abandoned. This is what I came to look for in a mate.

But my father's spirituality was not ever at the forefront of any of his perspectives on life until I was an adult, so I don't know if or how that influenced his view of sex. Nothing was ever discussed from that viewpoint. My mother, on the other hand, has been a devout Christian for as long as I can remember, so her perspectives have often been colored by scripture. She has had a tendency to convey her perspectives by describing her own history as a cautionary tale.

My mother gave birth to my sister when she was 19, after becoming pregnant by her high school sweetheart at 18. He did not want to be a father and my mother did not attempt to make him be one. She walked calmly and proudly out of his life forever. When she was 20 my grandmother convinced her to accept a marriage proposal from a young man in their neighborhood, saying that no other man would ever want her because she already had a child and this was her last chance. My mother married the boy, gave birth to his son, and a few years later he began to carry on secret affairs with other young men behind her back. They eventually divorced, he offered no child support and my mother refused to force him to. She walked calmly and proudly out of his life forever.

And then she met my father, now a 30 year old woman with two older children, and my father a 27 year old still living at his parent's house. They moved in together and were married within a couple of years, bought their first home, and gave birth to me. A few years later they gave birth to my brother. My mother received a happy ended to a sad story.

I know she had hoped my story wouldn't parallel her own. In the same way that she didn't want my personal romantic life to meander the same paths as hers had, she also didn't want me to learn sexual lessons too early. She had been molested multiple times in her youth, and I believe this may have contributed to the way she protected and shielded me from sex and sexuality to such extremes. But her desire to keep certain topics from entering my awareness only led me to heightened curiosity, which walked me into trouble later on. It was difficult to reconcile the idea of sex and sexuality as something so invisible when the evidence of sex and sexuality was so clearly apparent in the ages of my older siblings. Simple math helped me conclude that my sister was born when our mother was still young, and it didn't take long at all for me to notice that my older brother looks entirely dissimilar to the rest of us. Sex was everywhere in my family legacy, but it was never out in the open.

I think it is because of the secrecy and lack of communication about the finer details that I was left to my own devices, figuring everything out on my own and coming to faulty conclusions from a very, very young age.

### **Perspectives & Convictions**

After taking inventory of all I have experienced, I came to the conclusion shortly after conceiving my son that sex was a strong and dangerous force. I did not regret becoming pregnant and bringing my son into the world, but the issues that led to the eventual dissolution of my relationship with his father altered the casual way that I had once viewed sex and intimacy. It had gone from a private shame to a public one, as I struggled with the trauma of my past abusive relationship, the tragic loss of one baby and the eventual birth of another, and then to the sting of a second abandonment when my son's father failed to remain committed to our new family. I took up the position that sex was messy and troublesome and indeed best saved for the safety of marriage, and took a personal vow of celibacy. For three years I struggled to find my place in the world as a single woman with a child who would not be intimate with anyone who would otherwise be interested in dating me. It was extremely difficult and I eventually succumb to the weight of the world's expectations. I entered into a sexual relationship that was so disastrous as to constitute a book in and of itself. This only further damaged my relationship with sex, while simultaneously enlightening me to never before glimpsed possibilities for sexual union. At this point in my story I am convinced that sex IS best saved until marriage, but I maintain the position that there is nothing wrong with marrying young. It is better that two healthy young people commit to one another and stay the course, than that a person should fly from partner to partner only gathering up further confusion along the way. It is good for parents to have frank and open dialogues with their children as soon as the child expresses a curiosity, rather than allowing them to wonder and seek information elsewhere. It is good for people to be educated and aware of the complex working of their

own body, if only to heighten their respect for it. It is good for people to understand the full weight of the bond created in sexual union, so that they won't make those bonds haphazardly.

I have spoken much too long on this topic and could not possibly encompass all of my thoughts into the 8 page format this paper requested. In final summary I will say, I believe that the topic of human sexuality is broad and vast and the discussion will never truly end. As long as we live we have the possibility of discovering new information and new truths, or even just uncovering old memories that change how we view ourselves and our partners at present. I wish there was more time to delve deeper into all of these matters, but the essay would never end.

## **Sexual Therapy**

### **Conducting Sex Therapy**

In light of my lengthy and complicated sexual biography, I believe my approach to conducting sexual therapy has the capacity to be overwhelmingly positive in many ways. I am very knowledgeable about many topics but also entirely familiar with the feeling of hesitancy when it comes to discussing those topics. I also feel as though I have a lot of personal insight into the issue of shame and sexual trauma, but not in a way which makes me uncomfortable speaking on the matter. I think, in spite of the personal convictions I have established for myself, I am very open to examining a wide array of sexual concepts and possibilities because my curiosity tends to keep me extremely open-minded and able respectfully accept almost any facet of sexual health or sexual dysfunction. Furthermore, having had no one to speak to about human sexuality myself, I can relate to the need for a safe and nonjudgmental space to explore what can sometimes be seen as a very taboo subject. I would not deny someone else something that I could have benefited from myself.

However, it is worth noting that because of my spiritual beliefs I cannot say that I will not struggle with my own biases. There are some decisions and behaviors which are outlined as clearly negative in scripture. Knowing that it is not up to me to decide what someone else ought to do or not do will allow me to remain respectful of individual autonomy, but perhaps my spiritual perspective will also make me sensitive to potential issues that may occur for my client. There may be a way to respectfully articulate some of the possibilities surrounding their decisions, without superimposing my own will onto their sexual lives and development. I am well aware that the course of my own upbringing and the unfolding of my own sexual history has no bearing on what my clients will ultimately experience, but perhaps it affords me a bit of heightened perspective nonetheless.

It should be noted that though I was uncommunicative to a fault as a young person, I presently have no discomfort speaking about sex and sexuality on a clinical level. I can still be shy to self-disclose, depending on the circumstances, but in a clinical capacity I don't see sexual self-disclosure as a necessary course of action. If it becomes necessary for any reason, I don't doubt that I will be able to utilize proper and appropriate self-disclosure principles to therapeutic effect, and avoid shifting the focus to myself when counseling my clients. I also have no discomfort listening to details of sex and sexuality, and even sexual assault, as my awareness and education on the topic has left me difficult to shock. Experiences in conversations with individuals outside of my family of origin have shown me that I can readily strike the right balance between objectivity and empathic understanding.

Given the intersection between sex and sexuality and nearly every other area of human existence, it is entirely likely that the topic of sex will be presented in therapy at some point or another. It may so happen that a client I work with is unaware of the role of sexuality in their lives, and I may need to tactfully address the matter before they bring it to my attention themselves. I believe the way that I will do that will involve gentle questioning to allow the client to bring the matter to the table of

their own volition. If there is resistance to the topic, depending on the client, I may opt to be more direct. There will likely be times when a client is unable or unwilling to discuss sex at any given time, and I would not want to push the matter so as not to cause harm or further trauma.

Whether working with adults or children, there is always the possibility that conversations around sex become part of our sessions. There may be clients where the majority of their concerns stem from or revolve around sexual issues, and there is no way of knowing ahead of time exactly what an individual client will come seeking. I have to be prepared, as a clinician, to offer my clients the highest possible care while simultaneously remaining aware of my own limitations so that I can refer them to a specialist if need be. I do not desire nor intend to specialize in issues of human sexuality, but I do believe I will be well prepared to assist in certain matters by the end of this course.