

A woman with blonde hair and tattoos on her arms is standing in a field of tall grass at sunset. She has her eyes closed and her hands clasped above her head. The background shows a hazy sky with soft clouds and a distant hillside.

.....

# SACRED SEXY & WHOLE

.....

UNDRESSING PURITY CULTURE,  
REDRESSING REDEMPTION

by Rachel Halder

.....

# SACRED SEXY & WHOLE

.....

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. INTRODUCTION	1
- My Story	4
II. THE FEMALE BODY & CHRISTIANITY	7
- Sacred Beginnings	8
- EXERCISE: Sacred Sexuality Ritual	10
III. PURITY CULTURE	13
- EXERCISE: Re-interpreting Your Sexual Beliefs	17
IV. SPIRITUAL TRAUMA & SEXUALIZED VIOLENCE	18
- Spiritual Abuse & Trauma	19
- Sexualized Violence	22
- Purity Culture as a form of Sexualized Violence	24
V. SHAME	27
- EXERCISE: Alchemizing Shame	30
VI. NEUROSCIENCE	33
- Neuroscience & Sexuality	34
- Aliah's Story	37
- Aspen's Story	41
- My Story	43
- EXERCISE: Understanding Your Story	47

.....

# SACRED SEXY & WHOLE

.....

## TABLE OF CONTENTS CONTINUED

VII. HEALING SPIRITUAL & SEXUAL TRAUMA	49
- Top-Down Approach	53
- Bottom-Up Approach	55
- Therapeutic Pussy Massage	57
- EXERCISE: Pussy Massage	60
- Somatic Sexual Practices	63
- Jade Egg	67
- Purification VS. Pleasure	69
- Sideways Approach	70
- EXERCISE: Body Scan Meditation	78
- Embodied Inter-spirituality	79
VIII CONCLUSION	84
VIII. RESOURCES & ENDNOTES	88
- Resources	89
- Bibliography	90

I don't know about you, but I didn't grow up talking about sex.

I was curious, however, and read the books I received on the topic from front to back... repeatedly. But since I didn't know who to talk to or how to talk about sex, I sought the "secrets" through the Internet and school friends' knowledge, most of which was distortedly learned through siblings, older kids on the bus, pornography or pop-culture media.

Curiosity at age 15 prompted me to try it out, because I wanted to know what the big, forbidden secret shrouded in silence was all about! But simply "trying it out" without emotional preparation or anatomical knowledge of my own pussy and pleasure came at a price. That price included emotional abuse, a misunderstanding of what sexual intimacy is and could be, as well as peer-led slut-shaming and judgment, harsh Christian teachings on sexual morality, and a lot of guilt, shame, and fear wrapped around my sexually turned on female body, anatomy, autonomy, self-esteem and sense of self-worth.

Additionally, I felt completely isolated, like I couldn't talk to anyone about what was going on because I was "bad" for doing it in the first place. And when people intervened, I immediately went into self-sabotaging, self-criticizing mode, so all I heard was blame and shame and the conversation became unproductive. So not long after "trying it out," I turned off my turn-on, shut down my sexuality, and lived with a damaged sense of self and personal power for the next 10 years.

There is a major disconnect when we hear "sex is dirty, save it for someone you love," but then are expected to go out in the world, get married to heterosexual partners, and magically unlearn the idea that "sex is dirty" overnight. If we find it difficult to have a loving sexual life with our husband, wife, partner or one-night stand lover, it's easy to cast blame upon our partner or ourselves, rather than recognizing it's the fault of the sex education or sexual understandings we received as young adults. Throw into the mix growing up in the current Western culture, being attracted to the same gender, not feeling like you're the

sex you were assigned to at birth, a history of incest, or being in a sexually abusive relationship and anything outside of the paradigm of “don’t have sex before marriage” becomes taboo and shameful.

**Human sexuality is an immensely positive life force energy.** And unfortunately, that positive life force energy has often been suppressed by religious teachings on sexuality. I’m not saying this as someone who is anti-religion. In fact, I have an obsessive fascination with religion and have been a deeply spiritual person since I was birthed by my mama.

And yet, through my undergrad and master degree studies of religion, my 600-hour Integrated Love, Sex, and Relationship coaching training with the Tantric Institute of Integrated Sexuality, my life experiences with Christianity, sexuality and trauma, not to mention the hundreds of conversations and coaching sessions I’ve had with women and LGBTQ+ people coming from religious (mostly Christian) backgrounds, I have seen the suppression of sexuality in individual lives and the culture at large—as absorbed and learned through modern Christian ethics focused on “purity”—as a form of spiritual trauma, damaging people’s innate sense of self and autonomy, inhibiting the full human expression of God’s gifts and fracturing one’s relationship with the Divine. And unfortunately, **such suppression not only creates a culture of victim-blaming and slut-shaming, but also perpetuates abuse in all forms: emotional, physical, sexual, spiritual and psychological.**

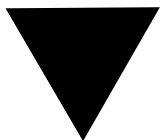
Are you disconnected from your sexuality? Do you experience pain in sex or a lack of desire? Do you suffer from sexual shame or trauma? I created this e-book to show you that you can shed the religious sexual shame or Christian purity culture paradigm and discover instead a spiritual understanding of God, the Universe, and/or yourself that resonates with your belief system and who you are in your entirety.

Sacred, Sexy & Whole offers a foundation of neuroscience to enlighten how these layers of trauma can be healed and restored through cognitive and somatic practices that encourage you to engage with your sexuality. Through writing exercises, practices and meditations offered

in these pages, you can help heal your sexuality.

All humans are worthy of holy and erotic sexual lives filled with passion, healing, love and compassion, that transcends to the Divine cosmos and roots into the deepest sense of self.

This book outlines your way into  
wholeness.



## What's My Story?

Now you might be thinking, “Okay, cool, but who the heck is Rachel Halder and why should I pay attention to anything she says?” And to that I respond, good question! I encourage questioning. Always. Asking questions is how I ended up writing this ebook, and it’s through the questions that I continue walking my spiritual path.

Don’t take everything I say for granted. Try it on for size, experiment with the practices and ideas, take what works for you and leave the rest. Though I am a bit of a sexuality "evangelist," I am not attached to my definitions or understandings.

What I want more than anything is for you to take a deep dive into yourself, to really explore those murky waters and shadow spaces, and come back out knowing yourself a little bit better and deeper, while simultaneously giving yourself love and compassion for who you are and how you became this human being.

First off, I am a cis-gendered, white, queer female who has had both male and female sexual partners. I grew up in rural Iowa attending a congregation of Mennonite Church USA, a protestant Christian Anabaptist and peace denomination. Therefore, my personal experiences with religious sex education reflect Mennonite teachings of my childhood, youth and undergraduate college education.

I have a history of abuse, first when I was three and then later in a much less nuanced way as a 15-year-old. Everyone handles abuse differently. I denied mine, like most people. And shut myself down, becoming quite “prudish” in my sexual beliefs and choices, harshly (yet unconsciously) judging friends who lived on the other end of the spectrum. In addition to sex-phobia, I also developed a relationship-phobia and an autoimmune disease in my bladder called Interstitial Cystitis.

I honestly didn't feel like I was missing out on much in terms of sex. I thought perhaps I was asexual and my libido was just lower than most (even though I was a very sexual pre-teen). Plus, sexual intercourse hurt and though I had clitoral orgasms, I really didn't get what all the "pleasure fuss" was about. I'll pick-up on my story throughout the book, but I wanted to give you context of where I began my career as a Sacred Sexuality Coach. Basically, I wasn't always aware of the fact that I am a glorious sex goddess!

I need to identify myself on this spectrum of beliefs and experiences because my initial contact with sexuality and religion—more specifically the Christian church—derive from this particular location, and I want you to know that location so you can better know me.

A black woman growing up in a Baptist church in Florida, an Asian-American woman growing up in a Los Angeles Korean Methodist church, a trans woman growing up in inner-city Chicago or a Muslim-American woman growing up in New York would have alternative perspectives, all of which most likely vary greatly from my own.

I'm coming from a place of white, cis-gendered privilege. Therefore, this book comes from that perspective, too, and though I did my best to be inclusive, I know I've probably messed up in a few places. I welcome constructive feedback in that department, as it's always my goal to better understand how I can be more inclusive in my language, research, coaching and understandings.

I have a Masters of Religion degree from Claremont School of Theology studying the topics of sexuality, religion and trauma healing, and I've researched and engaged in hundreds of conversations with people coming from a variety of Christian, religious and racial or ethnic backgrounds both similar and different from mine. My research was specifically on Christian purity culture, yet through my studies I continue to hear stories of shame, fear, and pain instilled from other religious teachings on sexuality, so I want to leave the door open to all religious backgrounds though I myself come from Christianity.



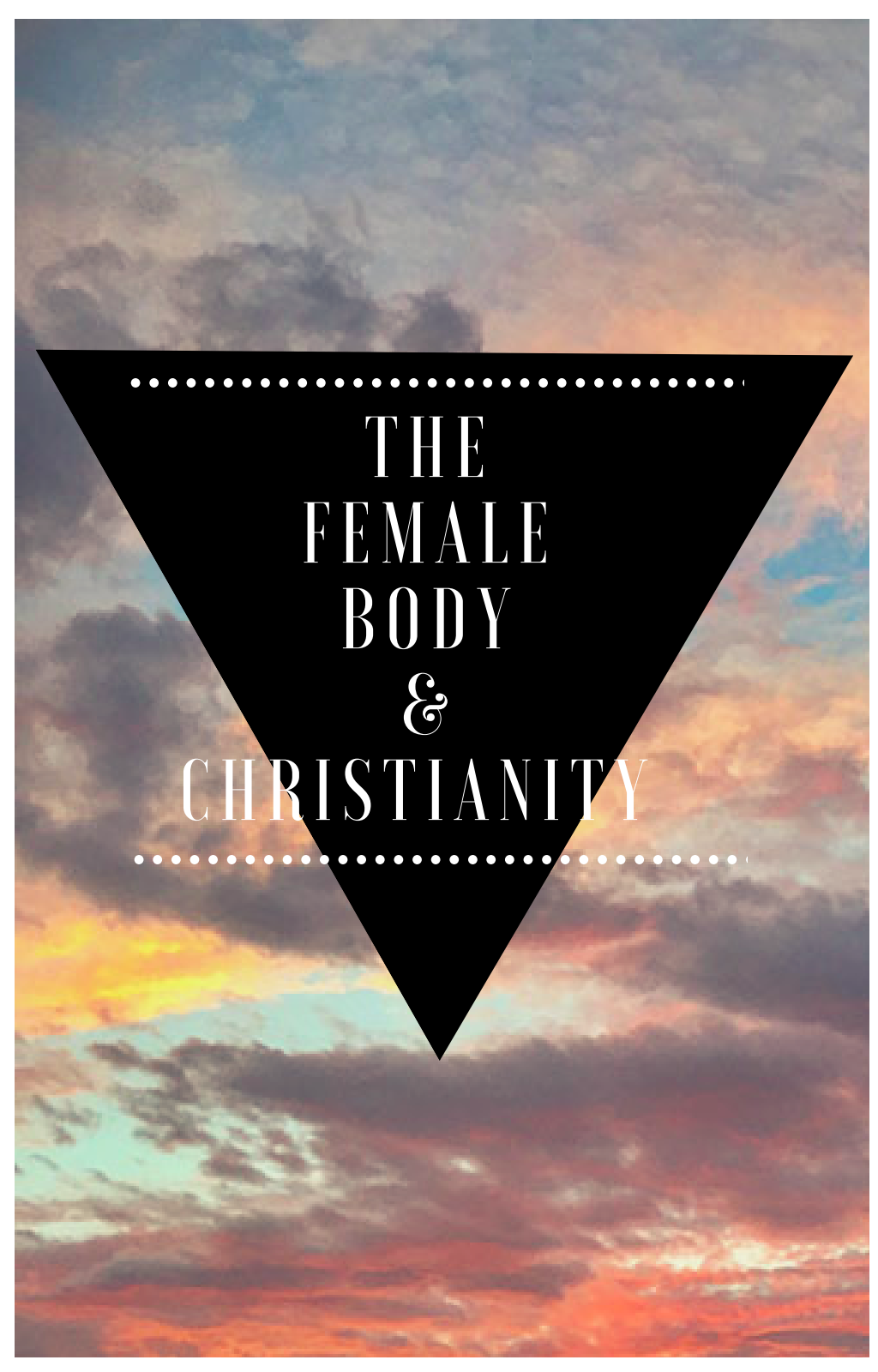
I am not making a blanket statement that all religious and Christian teachings on the topic of sexuality are horrible, bad, and abusive: that is not true, and there are many positive ways one can understand sexual ethics through the lens of Christianity. But I am making a statement that many people taught puritanical Christian sexual morality now live within a paradigm instilled in them that they may or may not recognize, and find it difficult to break those bonds regardless of how far removed they are from attending church or belonging to a religious group.

I'm not sure what location you're coming from. You may be a deeply devoted Christian and attend church every Sunday, having done so since you were a child. Or you may have gone on a spiritual pilgrimage to India, finding healing through mantras and yoga. Or maybe you've moved far away from church and religion at large, living in Inter-spiritual communes or attending sacred plant ceremonies in Peru instead, finding spiritual fulfillment in ways outside of organized religion. But for some reason this e-book landed in your lap, and therefore will resonate on a level.

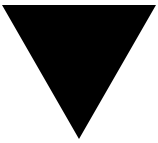
I don't know your personal blockages with sex and sexuality, but I know some people coming from these backgrounds experience:

- Sexual frustration and blocks
- A lack of pleasure or lack of sexual interest
- Trouble connecting with others
- Feeling used and ashamed in their sexual experiences
- Seeking out sex for the wrong reasons
- Painful disorders and syndromes in their pelvis and/or vagina
- Shutting down in experiences of connection with partners
- Shame and embarrassment around their body and sexuality
- Guilt for masturbating and self-pleasuring

Books could be written that break down each of these experiences. However, reflecting the many anecdotal conversations with people who have experienced these feelings, I broadly sweep those experiences within the parameters of protestant Christianity, recognizing that my assessment does not speak for all people who have experienced life within protestant Christianity or religion.



THE  
FEMALE  
BODY  
&  
CHRISTIANITY



# Sacred Beginnings

I am a woman and a feminist. I have a fascination with the female sexual experience (meaning anyone who identifies as female or the energy of having a vagina), and therefore a lot of my research has been centered around the female body.

And there's one thing I want all female identifying humans or humans with a vagina to know, including you:

The Feminine Form, the vagina and sexual intimacy began as sacred.

Feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruther writes, "From archaeological evidence one can conclude that the most ancient human image of the divine was female." (1) Naomi Wolf, author of *Vagina: A New Biography*, offers an example in the Sumerian religion who saw the goddess Inanna's "wondrous vagina" as "connected with the search for wisdom." (2) The worship of Astarte/Ashtharoth, a goddess of fertility, sexual generation, and "wisdom of the cosmos itself," also illustrates the female body as sacred. (3)

But when the Hebrew's developed monotheism and began worshipping the masculine and patriarchal "One God," a God evolving alongside the Goddess religions and sacred priestesses, Goddess worship was slowly regarded as negative and evil. As evidenced in the Hebrew Bible, sacred prostitutes and priestesses—who copulated with male worshippers in an expression of divine union and sacred intercourse—were deemed sinful by the Hebrew people, marking their spiritual practice as inappropriate and regarding "divine unions" as "abominations." (4)

Since the Christian church is rooted in this milieu, it is not surprising that women's bodies are debated and deemed "wrong" and "sinful" in Western culture. Though the New Testament does not reveal if Jesus discussed the topic of the female body, the portrayal of his lived

existence displays a very embodied way of being in the world. Paul, however, introduced the Christian world to the idea that mind and body are not only separate, but at war with each other. (5) Wolf explains that Paul's letters "codified the notion—so influential in the next two millennia—that sexuality is shameful and wrong, and that unbridled female sexuality, even within marriage, is particularly shameful and wrong." (6)

Additionally, the modern Christian understanding that the female body is not an aspect of God—or in other words, that God does not and cannot take on feminine form—is a recent development. Ruether explains that early Christianity saw female imagery in God but became "marginalized by a victorious Greco-Roman Christianity that repressed it." (7)

We see the side-effects of these beliefs in philosophers and theologians alike. One of the early church founders, Tertullian said of women, "You are the devil's gateway . . . How easily you destroyed man, the image of God. Because of the death which you brought upon us, even the Son of God had to die." (8) The ethics of Augustine, Aquinas, and Kant demonstrate a deep-rooted fear in sexuality, women, and bodies, particularly using "Eve as the cause of the fall and the root of evil" in the world. (9)

In *Constructing the Sexual Crucible*, sex therapist and expert David Schnarch says, "The sex affirming Hebraic roots of Western civilization has been masked by Augustine's legacy of eroticism-hating sexual dualism, perpetuated by authoritarian-rooted Christian dogma, which negated the basic worthiness of human beings. The evolution of Western culture is a history of theologically based sexual oppression." (10) This explains why more contemporary theologians, such as Karl Barth, propagate the belief of subordination and that women are to be secondary to the man of the household. (11)

# EXERCISE: SACRED SEXUALITY RITUAL

What does it mean to see your sexuality as sacred?

It means loving ALL aspects of yourself and your body, viewing everything as a Divine creation. Loving your clitoris, cervix, anus, pubic hair, womb, ovaries and fallopian tubes. Loving your pussy juices, menstrual blood and the way you smell. Loving your breasts, belly, butt and face. Loving whatever body parts you have, regardless of what gender or sex you identify as. Loving your beauty, your bitchiness, your weaknesses and your POWER, your uniqueness and truth. Loving your sexuality, sensuality, desire and drive to connect. Seeing your sexuality as sacred means giving your body, pleasure and emotional being the deepest devotion and care, seeing the godness within everything you possess.

And that literally means everything. Not just the parts of you deemed “good,” such as your generous nature or your impeccable skills at conflict resolution and mediation, or your perfectly plump ass or the cute dimples on your cheeks.

It means revering the abstract parts of you, such as your soul, to the concrete parts of you, such as that extra cellulite on your thighs. It means revering the socially acceptable parts of you, like your sweet tooth's cookie eating habits, to the socially unacceptable parts of you, like the slutty part of you who dreams of voyeurism and threesomes, or sleeping with someone of the same sex.

Think of what you sense as sacred. Is it watching a sunrise on a camping trip? Looking at Mother Mary on an alter? Imagining Jesus Christ sticking up for the oppressed and down-trodden? Taking a pilgrimage to Mecca? Participating in a 5Rhythms or Ecstatic Dance class? Sitting atop Machu Picchu or the highest peak in the Alps? Watching a baby's chest rise and fall with each sleeping breath? How do you know that this event is sacred? What does it feel like inside your body? Do you feel warm and fuzzy, tingly, a sense of deep awe and wonder? What kind of expressions does it bring to your face?

A smile, relaxation of your eyes, a sense of calm and peace, that everything is right with the world? Does it create a unitive feeling, an expression of oneness and complete interconnection?

And what do you desire to do when you witness something so deeply sacred? Do you want to bow down, fall to your knees? Drop into prayer? Cry or laugh? Tell the world about it? Share it with your beloveds? Give love, hugs and kisses to everyone and everything you know?

Now picture the opposite of sacred. Picture someone or something that makes you feel uncomfortable. A trash dump. A challenging co-worker. The Syria war-zone. How does that make you feel? What sensations do you experience inside your body? What expressions land on your face?

Now picture your vulva or genitalia in full, vivid detail. If you're extra brave, get a hand-held mirror and take a look down there. How does that make you feel? What sensations do you experience inside your body in imagining or looking at your vulva or genitalia? Does it feel sacred? Do you feel a sense of awe and wonder? Or does it feel disgusting? Or perhaps you just feel indifferent?

Do this with all parts of yourself. Your pussy smell, your moon cycle (period), your asshole. Take an inventory on how you feel about your body. Does a sense of sacredness exist, or is it all resistance or dread?

When I first did this exercise, I felt a combination of fear, anxiety, dread and disgust. Or just nothing. I had distanced myself from a lot of these parts so much that I didn't feel anything at all. Just numbness. Which in terms of relationships is one of the worst and least sacred things we can feel. When there's "nothing," it means we really don't care. There's no meaning behind it. The relationship is dead.

But that's exactly what we're working with here: a relationship to our body, sexuality and soul. As spiritual people, we most likely revere connection and relationship as sacred. It's the way we know each other, communicate in the world. Yet in our society we often don't think of ourselves as having relationships with ourselves.



We just... are.

To see our sexuality as sacred, we must understand we're engaging in a relationship with all aspects of ourselves.

And the beautiful thing is that all relationships can be repaired. Even the hardest ones.

Our pussy or genitalia is our deepest source of power, pleasure and beauty. The way we feel about our vulva and vagina (or the energy of our vagina) is how we feel about ourselves over all. If we feel disgust when we look at our pussy, than we feel disgust about ourselves.

But when we feel happy and in love with our pussy and revere her as our sacred source of wisdom, then we begin feeling happy and in love with our whole selves and with life in general.

## The Ritual...

I invite you to engage in a sacred sexuality ritual with yourself for the following week. Treat yourself and your body as you would treat any deeply sacred or spiritual site. Look at yourself naked in front of a mirror. Pay attention to the parts of you typically skimmed over or ignored. Send loving energy to your cellulite, acne scars and pubic hair.

See the sacredness within your naked body. Give yourself pleasure—gently rub coconut oil or body lotion into your skin, really treating every inch of your skin like it's a holy object.

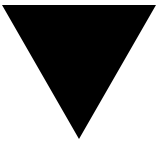
Ask pussy what she wants in order to be experienced as sacred. Is it a candlelit bath with essential oils? Dancing in the moonlight? Eating a delicious meal? Indulging in expensive raw cacao chocolates?

Set aside one evening in your schedule where you 100% revere yourself as sacred, giving pussy and your body exactly all she needs, allowing your sensual dance to be a prayer to the divine.



PURITY  
CULTURE





# Modern Purity Culture

Most likely you didn't grow up believing that the feminine form, particularly the vagina, was sacred, or that sex could be an ecstatic union with the Divine. My guess is that you instead grew up hearing that to be a true woman of God, you must remain "pure." Or did you learn that it was your responsibility to keep a man's thoughts "pure"? Perhaps you were told your purity was the only thing of worth about you, that if you lost your virginity you became damaged goods? Or were you told that having sex turned you into a chewed piece of gum or a jar that loads of people spat into? Maybe you just grew up with a limiting idea of exactly what your gendered role to play in the world looked like, and you never quite felt like you fit into it.

Purity culture promotes the idea that a woman's purity—her virginity—is of paramount importance in her life. Her purity deems her lovable. Her virgin status makes her acceptable to God and her future husband. And ultimately, her virginity marks her worth. The church has always been preoccupied with monitoring human sexuality, and particularly the female's role in procreation, but purity culture—a movement beginning in the early 1990's as a response to "the teen pregnancy crisis of the 1970s"—took it to a whole new "modern" level. (12)

Dianna E. Anderson, author of *Damaged Goods: New Perspectives on Christian Purity*, writes "...youth-focused purity movement theology sought to return sex to its supposedly rightful place as a public issue, and to position the Christian family at the center." (13) This movement not only monitored physical sexuality, but also emphasized emotional and mental purity. (14) Abstinence-only sex education became the norm in both private and public schools due to evangelical politics and thought leaders such as Joshua Harris whose best-selling Christian dating book became the norm for youth group study sessions. (15)

The "No Shame Movement," an online platform promoting the unlearning of purity culture observes, "Within the conservative

Christian context, purity culture is simply the view of any discussion of things of a sexual nature outside of the context of heterosexual marriage as taboo.” (16)

Those who operate within purity culture are expected to abstain from sexual intercourse and all other sexual acts under all circumstances. Additionally, they “must adhere to a strict heteronormative lifestyle,” abstain from masturbation and other forms of self-pleasure, and renounce lustful thoughts about others. (17) This idea of purity advances beyond the act of sex and “includes an insistence on female modesty and responsibility to shield boys and men from sexual temptation.” (18)

Anderson elaborates on the above definition, writing “[Purity proponents] believe that sex is the binding act of marriage; that marriage is God-created and between one man and one woman for all time; that purity means no sexual thoughts or lust; that men and women belong—physically, metaphysically, emotionally, spiritually—to their spouses; and that the Bible clearly says that premarital sex is a sin.” (19)

In his best-selling book, Harris explained how purity goes “beyond sexual purity.” He wrote, “God also wants us to pursue purity and blamelessness in our motives, our minds, and our emotions.” (20) Shannon Ethridge, author of *Every Young Woman’s Battle*, a dating book explaining how women can “achieve or reclaim sexual integrity,” reveals to women that to remain pure they must dress modestly, shun flirting, avoid romantic fantasizing, and ward off men who are only interested in one thing: their bodies. (21) Ethridge attributes stories and testimonies of teenage girls’ battles with body image issues, eating disorders, and unwanted sexual contact and/or sexual regret, as explanations of why purity virtues are not only important for women, but essential to save her self-esteem.

Such themes dominate the purity culture movement’s rhetoric. What goes unchecked in this rhetoric is that the movement bases its claims in loosely-based “theology” undergirding in shame and blame. Authors such as Harris and Ethridge create sexual dissociation, which Harris

even admits two decades after writing his book. (22)

At the age when most teenagers peak in curiosity and sexual exploration, as they investigate answers relating to their bodies and experiences, they smack into a culture that instructs them their bodies are bad, what they do with their bodies is bad, and insists they must repress the natural feelings existing within their very beings.

The repressive messages slam into silence when teens inquire about sexual intercourse, anatomy, intimacy, birth control methods and sexual health. Anderson writes, "The Christian right responded to changing times by instituting legalistic rules rather than grace, forgiveness, and mercy." (23) When one fails to follow the rules of "purity" the "perpetrator" fails the family, church, friends, and God. "While noble in intent, the purity movement has resulted in a destructive path of harmful misogyny and exclusion," avers Anderson. (24)

Those of us who experienced the purity movement were not taught to put sexuality at the center of our faith, life, health, or experience of being human. We were instead taught to put it aside at risk of sin without acknowledging that "an unbalanced and improper understanding of sexuality can put everything else in life off-kilter." (25)

## EXERCISE: RE-INTERPRETING YOUR BELIEFS

Just because you weren't taught to put sexuality at the center of your faith, life, health or experience of being human doesn't mean you can't learn how to or begin doing exactly that.

Make a list of all the beliefs you remember learning about your sexuality and pleasure. Think of what you heard in Sunday school and church, school and health/science class, and family about sex and masturbation. And if you didn't learn anything, if what you received was silence, consider what messages you received through that silence.

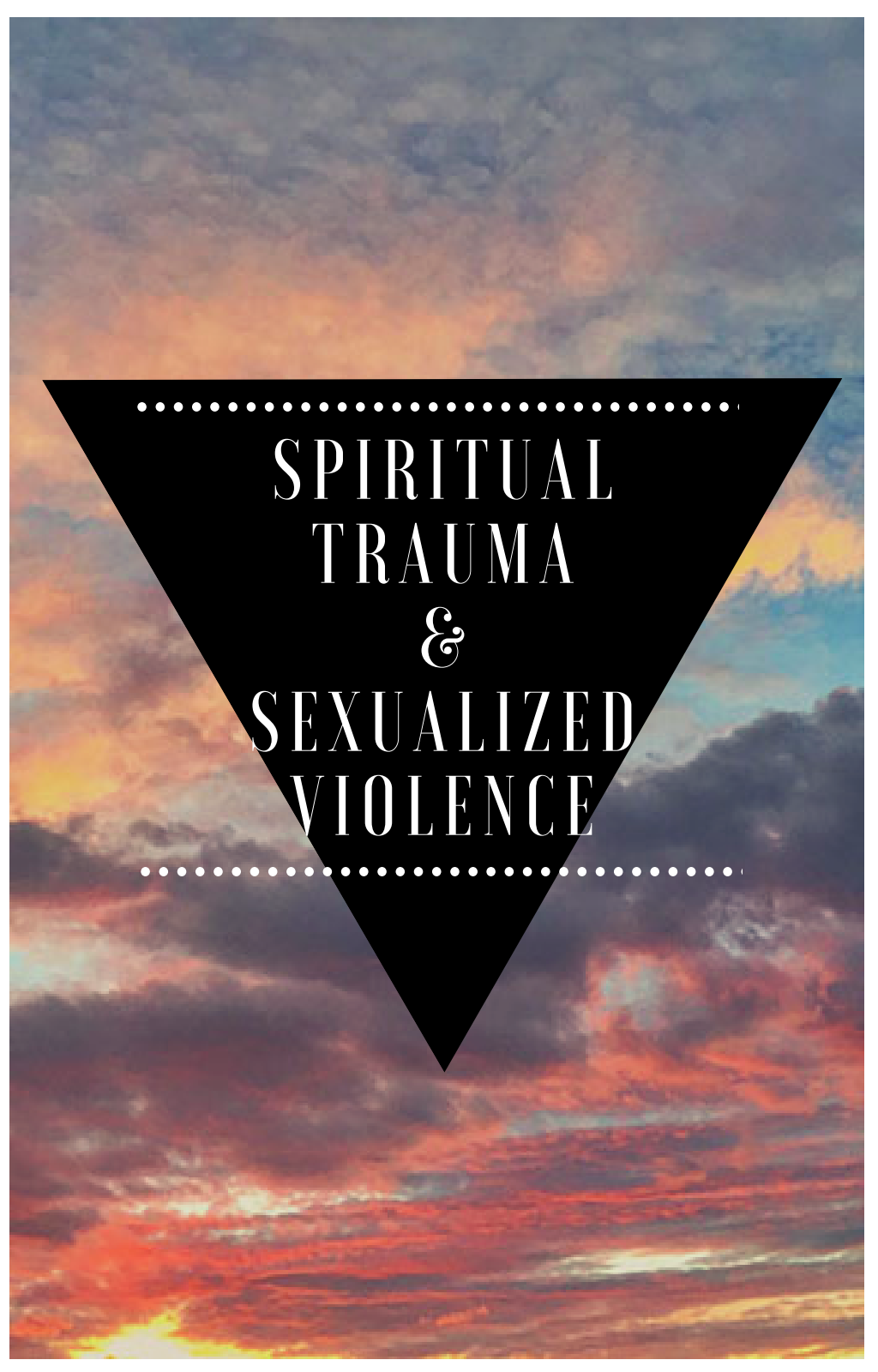
Now go back through that list and cross out the beliefs you no longer cognitively believe are true.

Go back through that list and circle the beliefs you no longer believe to be true, but that you feel are still somehow haunting or controlling how you live and experience your sexual life.

Now write down your goals and desires surrounding your sexuality. What is it that you really want and desire? Do you want to connect deeper with your partner? Experience sex as a prayer? Be able to self-pleasure without guilt? Write down every desire you can think of.

And now, create a new list of belief systems that support your sexual goals and desires in their entirety. You may write, "Sex is not a dirty sin. It's a sacred act that brings two people together in holy union." Or something like, "Loving someone of the same sex is a beautiful display of God's variance and complexity." Make this list as complete as you possibly can. Allow it to percolate over a few days, adding new beliefs as they pop into your mind.

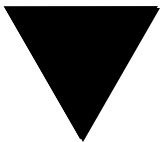
Finally, pray and live into this new belief system. Imagine what life would be like living with these beliefs engrained in your being. Give yourself opportunities to explore these beliefs with others. Surrender into a new sense of knowing your sexual self, and all sexual desires and sensual appetite, as sacred and divine.



.....

**SPIRITUAL  
TRAUMA  
&  
SEXUALIZED  
VIOLENCE**

.....



# Spiritual Abuse & Trauma

The “shame and blame” promoted by purity culture is but one stratum of the many ways spiritual abuse and trauma is perpetuated. I am framing spiritual abuse and trauma in a particular way for the purpose of this ebook.

In one sense, any sort of abuse can be considered spiritual abuse as all violence directed toward an individual innately damages a person’s spiritual sense of self, especially if they’re a child or someone lacking the tools to understand autonomy and individual personhood. Spiritual abuse has been loosely defined as “a kind of abuse which damages the central core of who we are. It leaves us spiritually discouraged and emotionally cut off from the healing love of God.” Another definition is “the mistreatment of a person who needs help, support or greater spiritual empowerment, with the result of weakening, undermining, or decreasing that person’s spiritual empowerment.” (26) For our context here, I am looking at spiritual abuse and trauma in alternative ways:

- The use of spiritual “truths” or biblical texts to do harm to another by justifying an action, creed, discipline, violence, or negative belief system. For example, discussing sexuality through the lens of purity culture justifies a negative belief system about a person’s innate sense of self and place in relation to other humans and God.
- Abuse occurring within a spiritual context or setting. As an illustration, if a priest, pastor, youth minister, lay person or peer sexually violates or rapes, or if a pastor or congregation shames a person for having sex, dressing “inappropriately,” a same-sex attraction, etc., and uses spiritual texts and truths to hold that person “accountable.”
- Using Divine authority to justify the actions of abuse. The statement that it is “God’s Divine will” for a woman to cover up so a man does not lust after her, or using “God’s Divine will” for a husband to demand sex from his wife at any moment are examples of justification.

- Offering a “grace-less contingency” in one’s relationship with God, or to “make God’s love contingent on spiritual practices of one kind or another.” (27)

Trauma creates a “deep wound that happens when something abnormally shocking, painful or harmful occurs and leaves us feeling overwhelmed and threatened.” (28) This wound can happen through direct involvement in an event—or series of events—or by witnessing an event(s). In general, trauma is a type of stress that doesn’t leave the body. Dr. Peter Levin, author of *In an Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness*, asserts that traumatic stress occurs “when our ability to respond to threat is overwhelmed.” (29) Stress resulting from a one-time experience, such as rape, is characterized as an acute stress. “Acute stressors have a clear beginning, middle, and end,” affirms Emily Nagoski in *Come As You Are*, even though a person may not feel like the traumatic event actually ends, since the stress is stored in the body and continues to play an active role in a victim’s life. (30)

Trauma results from other than a one-time event however. It also happens through exposure to “chronic stressors,” such as the pain of societal racism, classism, or sexism. Daily micro-aggressions directed towards a person’s body is a trauma that builds over time, leaving a sense of shame, fear, isolation, and pain within a person, but perhaps without the knowledge of what creates those feelings. Learning about sex through the lens of purity culture is a form of a chronic stress. When a young girl’s only understanding of sex is that she is responsible for keeping herself pure, and if she does not she commits a cardinal sin, the pressure of remaining “pure” will feel immense, becoming a chronic stress in her life either in a subconscious or conscious role. “If our stress is chronic and we don’t take deliberate steps to complete the cycle, all that activated stress just hangs out inside us, making us sick, tired, and unable to experience pleasure with sex (or much of anything else),” explains Nagoski.

Traumatic experiences, whether one-time events or compounded events, lead to an aftermath similar to those who have experienced abuse.

This aftermath affects an individual's identity, resulting in negative effects in mind, body, soul, and spirit. Spiritual trauma is "the violation of the sacred or spiritual core in human beings, harm at the innermost level." (31) Most would agree that trauma leads to a form of spiritual trauma—if a person cannot recognize the Grace of God within a traumatic experience or prolonged traumatic interfacing, and instead shoulders the blame and responsibility, a form of spiritual trauma results.

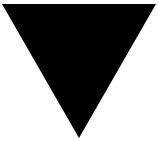
Spiritual trauma creates a schism in one's relationship with the Divine, making it difficult for the person to accept love and wholeness and in turn disconnecting from or renouncing God or other Divine entities, saints, or characters. Additionally, spiritual trauma can create resentment toward the Christian church, religion, and/or spirituality. The trauma further fractures one's innate sense of worth and wholeness, especially when a spiritual community removes unconditional love from the traumatized person, or the traumatized person no longer feels loved in the eyes of a creator God.

Trauma—both spiritual and physical in nature—marks not just the person who received the initial hit, but on all people with whom the person interacts: loved ones, family members, children, and society at large. Bessel van der Kolk writes, "...traumatic experiences do leave traces, whether on a large scale (on our histories and cultures) or close to home, on our families, with dark secrets being imperceptibly passed down through generations. They also leave traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems." (32)

While trauma may be perceived to only affect the brain, it also inhibits one from living a "normal" day-to-day existence. But the reality is that trauma haunts all aspects of a human being—both the conscious and unconscious mind—and it lives within the body's neurological systems, ready to resurface at any momentary trigger that may not even resemble the original traumatic event.



If this feels familiar and you're having "ah-ha" moments, or if you feel a bit overwhelmed reading this definition as it strikes close to home, know that you are not alone. Stick with the ebook. I've been exactly you are at, and the beautiful thing to keep in mind is that you won't be stuck in this trauma forever. It might feel overwhelming, but there is hope. Later I have practices and exercises that can help you sort through spiritual trauma and guide you toward deep healing.



## Sexualized Violence

Another form of trauma results from sexualized violence, a term coined by Gloria Steinem, in reaction to the phrase sexual violence. As Steinem says, "there's nothing sexual about violence." (33) Sex awakens pleasure, joy, purification, ecstasy, connection, creativity, and birth. Violence mirrors control, pain, damage, loss, trauma, and death. Sex and violence must not be understood as mutual. And yet the two become entwined because of childhood or adult experiences in which the people who are loved also inflict pain.

Rather than further convoluting the notion that sex can somehow be equated to violence, I prefer to use the term sexualized violence to infer how society frequently uses sexuality as a weapon as opposed to the intended purpose of love, joy, sacredness, and new birth.

Though this ebook does not overtly focus on rape and sexual abuse, it still must be mentioned as it's something one in four women reading this have experienced. The reality of sexual shame and trauma is far more common than realized. Though the reported statistics in the United States are that "One in five women and one in 71 men will be raped at some point in their lives," these statistics only include those who have reported to law enforcement penal penetrative rape. (34)

The World Health Organization reports that one in three women world-wide experience some form of sexualized violence.(35) And on top of all that, rape and sexualized violence is the most under-reported

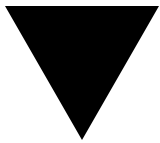
crime. According to the National Sexual Violence Resource Center, “... 63% of sexual assaults are not reported to police.”

Looking even further at sexualized violence that includes intimate partner or spousal violence—the subtle violence when, for example, a woman complies to have sex because her body believes that is what she must do for survival—it becomes impossible to actually understand an accurate estimate of how many women experience sexualized violence, but the numbers are high, potentially close to one in two. When examining the shame and trauma embedded in our culture through the attitude and teachings of sexuality, the statistics of those abused increases. Many people in our culture live with embedded trauma, simply for being a sexual being in a human body.

Rape is named by feminists as a form of “political control, enforcing the subordination of women through terror.”(36) Susan Brownmiller has written how rape is a way for patriarchy to maintain power: “Man’s discovery that his genitalia could serve as a weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of prehistoric times, along with the use of fire and the first crude stone axe. From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidating by which all men keep all women in a state of fear.”(37) It’s important to note that male rape, including male on male rape also occurs, and black women and those in the LGBTQ population experience rape at a much higher rate than straight, white people. These additional examples illustrate how rape is used in a way to exercise power and control over others, especially those minoritized or considered “less than.”

The church has done an appalling job at naming and condoning sexualized violence in all its forms from rape to emotional and verbal abuse of a sexualized nature, and it’s also been very slow to accept the reality of rape. Yet the church does outright accept a rhetoric and dogma that promotes “purity” and “abstinence,” insisting the only way for a woman to protect herself from the harm of rape is to be modest, meek, and restrained.

In its own unique way, purity culture then becomes political control, enforcing the subordination of women through terror: the terror of losing her virginity, becoming impure, or worst of all, being raped. When a woman reports that she has been sexually violated, the church and/or culture blame her by claiming she didn't protect herself well enough from the male sexual "condition." She is questioned: What was she wearing? Did she exude too much confidence? How much of her legs were showing? Did she flirt? The questions directed at a victim is endless, and often results in the victim retreating while the perpetrator—typically a heterosexual male—is exonerated and blame-free.



## Purity Culture as a form of Sexualized Violence

If you're reading this ebook, it's most likely because you've experienced some sort of repression of your sexuality through culture or religion. And since you've experience that repression, you most likely feel like there's something wrong with you: wrong with your body, wrong with your sexuality, wrong with your life. Women lack compassion towards ourselves, and this is because most of us have no idea how much trauma and shut-down we've inherited through culture and religion.

Maybe you don't define what you've experienced as trauma, or you feel it's inappropriate to equate your experience on the same level as someone who has experienced sexualized violence. But I am arguing that purity culture itself is a form of sexualized violence, and you are fully entitled to feel the pain, shame, anger and frustration of what these belief systems have done to your self-esteem and sexuality. Proponents of purity culture would be appalled at the suggestion that it coincides with sexualized violence, but I see no other way of looking at it. Not only is enforcing purity culture as a form of control parallel to enforcing rape as a form of control, but purity culture also leaves similar scars on women's and queer person's psyches, and therefore bodies, as does sexualized violence.

Tina Schermer Sellers, director of the Medical Family Therapy Program and instructor of marriage and family therapy at Seattle Pacific University, is one of the only scholars and researchers who explicitly

examines Christian purity culture and its negative effects. (38) In her graduate-level human sexuality courses, Sellers' students write sexual biographies. "I was seeing more and more amounts of sexual shame, of religious sexual shame . . . horrendous amounts. The self-loathing that people were feeling and describing about themselves really paralleled the kind of self-loathing that you often see with somebody who's experienced childhood sexual assault," Schermer Sellers explained. (39)

The damage of purity culture's induced sexual shame is psychologically devastating for many women (and queer persons, and some men), comparable to the psychological damage experienced by abuse survivors. Not only is it damaging, but purity culture's standards for women are also dehumanizing. They not only enforce the belief that women should not have sexual desires, but also promotes sexual disassociation. A woman must bottle all sexual desires, removing it from the shelf only when the "perfect man" comes along to wake her desire so she can live happily ever after, with the implication that only then can she will be sexually fulfilled and pleased.

Ironically, purity culture creates the exact thing it claims it is preventing: disconnection and shame. Purity culture often enforces a deep shame that pervades children, adolescents, young adults, and adults' views of sexuality and their bodies. An abstinence-only discourse that does not allow discussion, questioning, or critical thinking about sexuality and bodies creates disconnection, which in return creates shame. Additionally, abstinence-only discourse omits from the conversation the power of healing and transformation gained from sexual intimacy, or the utilization of sexuality as a powerful tool for self-growth. Sellers reiterates, "Nowhere in this absolute premarital chastity discourse is the message that sex can be healing and joyful (sometimes outside and sometimes inside of marriage), that it can lead to growth, a deeper more intimate relationship with God, and above all is created good, on purpose, as a gift, and for your pleasure and communion." (40)

Sexuality can be a bridge to the Divine, but not when one is engulfed in

shame. This shame interrupts a person's ability to know, understand, and experience God's grace and love. Sellers expounds:

"Shame modulates distance in intimacy and sexual expression [...] of God's active love. When people are filled with shame and self-loathing, their affected self-esteem takes precedence in interactions with others. It dominates and eclipses a person's ability to see and love another. In essence, sexuality encased in silence and shame keeps people from intimately knowing both God and each other, and cripples our ability as a community of believers to truly love and be a healing force in our hurting world." (41)



SHAME

An important element for those who have experienced sexualized violence of any sort—whether discrimination as an LGBTQ person, sexually violated as a child, or immersed in Christianity’s teachings of “purity”—is that of shame. If you’re reading this ebook, I can almost guarantee you, too, have experienced shame around your sexuality.

Brene Brown, a researcher, public speaker, and author on the topics of vulnerability, guilt, and shame, defined shame in a way that allows us to understand how Christianity’s teachings on sexuality damage people. “Shame is really easily understood as the fear of disconnection. Is there something about me, that if other people know it or see it, that I won’t be worthy of connection?” (42)

Shame creates a debilitating belief that I am not accepted, loved, or worthy of belonging to a particular group or the world at large. I possess an overwhelming fear of rejection that further contributes to a fear of death—if I do not belong to my tribe, then I may be eaten by a lion or worse. That shame and fear of rejection and death then can develop into self-hatred, manifested many times by “addiction, depression, violence, aggression, bullying, suicide, eating disorders,” states Brene Brown in her Ted Talk “Listening to Shame.” (43)

Whether the purpose is conscious or not, the Christian purity movement creates shame and utilizes fear to control women’s (and the entire spectrum of genders’) bodies and sexuality that can often lead to sexual dysfunction for women. It must be understood that it is not teaching a child to wait until she is older or partnered to have sex that creates sexual dysfunction for a woman. Rather it is the intense fear, shame, and silence that causes the dysfunction. Sellers explains that “Fear and Shame are the elements children experience when they are told their feelings for intimacy and connection, including their sexual curiosities and desires, are bad and wrong, a sin, not of God, disappointing to those they love, and place their future in jeopardy.” (44)

On the other hand, silence occurs when children and adolescents want to understand their bodies, sexuality, gender and relationships, and instead of being met with accurate, trusted, and detailed information,

they encounter silence and therefore an inability to understand sexuality in a healthy way.

Silence is just as harmful as not offering any information at all. Sex therapist Schnarch describes how “Silence suggests that eroticism is dirty, inherently embarrassing, dangerous, inappropriate, or vulgar; silence is an education in sexual attitudes and gender roles . . . the family is always the predominant purveyor of the child’s erotic map and attitudes toward eroticism.” (45)

Without a safe person or parents answering questions, and providing information on how to protect, enjoy, and understand themselves and their bodies, children look to popular culture—a culture based on sex as consumerism—to understand sexuality and body-image. This pop-culture image of sexuality, another culture based on shame and feelings of not measuring up or being “good enough,” reinforce the feelings of shame, fear, and failure, especially in young girls and women.

When a person receives teachings that emphasize a way of being that includes repressing her sexuality, feelings, emotions, and experiences of being an embodied human form, she is taught that her entire personhood is not welcomed if she falls outside the narrow path outlined for her. Purity teachings are rife with fear inducing tactics. For example, a man will not love a woman who is not a virgin. She will ruin her Christian testimony. She will fracture relationships with God, family, church and friends. She will be damaged by a sense of being impure and broken, a haunting failure that will follow her throughout life. She will feel spiritually ruined, disconnected from God and Jesus.

Analogies are used: she is the sticker that has been stuck too many times and will no longer stick to anything, or she is the delicate flower that falls apart after being passed around a room full of people. Either she conforms to the standards and “belongs” to friends, family, church and God, or she disobeys and is no longer accepted. And yet, even if one does conform and follows the narrow path, she still feels the disconnection through her unspoken fear of not belonging, of “disobeying” God’s teachings, and the church’s expectations. She indeed experiences the



spiritual trauma created by purity culture.

Anderson relates that when talking to Christian women around the U.S. who experienced purity culture, she saw a harmful mark left on most of the women's understanding of self. "Women simply didn't know themselves—their desires, their bodies, their own sexuality," she stated. On top of that, if a woman had gone outside of the purity culture's teaching on sexuality, "...they were left feeling damaged, alone, and shunned by a church that supposedly preaches forgiveness of any and all sins—except, apparently, sins of a sexual nature. Shame is rampant." (46) Purity culture teaches that only a woman who waits for marriage to have sex can experience a sexually fulfilling marriage. But the teaching does not always translate to reality. The fear and shame of being a woman with a sexuality doesn't disappear immediately upon marriage.

Neuroscientific research findings indicate that the fear and shame women experience through teachings on sexuality remain deeply embedded in her brain and heart wiring, preventing her from experiencing a fulfilling, sexually intimate life. Further, purity culture creates spiritual trauma that separates the woman from experiencing a loving God. Anderson writes, "God doesn't function in a currency of shame. Shame isn't from God, it isn't of God, and it isn't something Christians should engage in. Shame is not nor will it ever be a useful response to a person's experience of the world, especially when it comes to sexual experiences." (47)

## EXERCISE: ALCHEMIZING SHAME

Shame is an embodied experience, which means that when we experience shame it literally lives inside the body until it finds some sort of release. Often times we don't even know we have shame inside our body. Instead we feel embarrassed, fearful, angry, sad or some other emotion. But often the root of this emotion is shame.

Peter Levine talks about "Pendulation," a process in which you swing back and forth from one unpleasant experience to another pleasant experience in order to integrate the uncomfortable experience, making it feel more tolerable within. This process rewires your brain to connect to the unpleasant experience in a new way, which draws out new feelings of tolerance within.

How this would work in real life: during an experience in which you feel shame, you instead tap into pleasure and worthiness, which builds the power to choose your feeling and empowers you to expand your bandwidth of tolerance for the uncomfortable experience. You're also processing the shame, letting it move through your body instead of getting buried deep within your body.

The exercise below offers you an opportunity to alchemize shame that exists in your body into a new and different sensation, helping you associate shame with pleasure.

The practice also works to build a bridge from the discomfort into a more supportive feeling, which helps you as a general process to do when you're out in the world and encounter uncomfortable situations and feelings, and are able to work them into something more pleasurable or tolerable.

Sometimes you need to do this exercise a few times for it to really become an embodied experience, so don't give up if the first time feels uncomfortable.

\*\*\*Check out my YouTube video "Purity Culture, Sex & Shame" for a video description of how to do this practice.

# EXERCISE: ALCHEMIZING SHAME

I learned this practice from Layla Martin, who said when approaching this practice it's important to remember the following:

- 1) You are psychologically and emotionally stable enough to handle it
- 2) You can psychologically and emotionally stabilize yourself
- 3) You have the courage and ability to do this
- 4) Do this practice wholeheartedly, but if you feel you aren't ready for this work, then honor that and don't do it.... yet

Step 1: Put out your left hand and feel as if you're holding shame in that hand. Think of an experience of shame. Then feel the shame fully to embody it. Think of this as a training ground to welcome shame and make peace with it. Let the sensations, experiences, and expression of shame fully exhibit itself through sound, movement, emotion, dance and experience. Live into that shame for at least 1 minute.

Step 2: Put out your right hand and feel as if you're holding pleasure in that hand. Think of an experience of pleasure. Embody it: touch your face softly, rub your skin, laugh, smile and let pleasure fully exhibit itself through sound, movement, emotion, dance and experience. Live into that sensation of pleasure for at least 1 minute.

Step 3: Put out both of your hands. Feel how you are holding shame in your left hand and pleasure in your right. Now--very slowly--move those hands together. Let yourself experience BOTH the shame AND the pleasure slowly moving together.

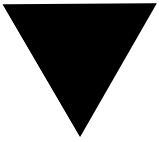
Step 4: Let your hands touch slowly -- first your fingertips, then your whole hands. Feel into the sensations of bridging these two emotions. What happens as your hands touch? What does it feel like to be able to have both of these emotions come together?

When you bridge the experience of shame with pleasure, you're creating a neuronal network in your brain, which transforms the negative emotions from being barriers and blockages to your sexual experience to becoming gate openers to your sexual wholeness.



NEUROSCIENCE

The rest of this ebook explains how and why fear and shame remain embedded in our bodies, but perhaps more importantly, I offer us solutions on how to remove this fear and shame through embodied sexual practices, meditations, and experiences. It is possible to live a life free from the shame trapping us into the feelings we currently have around our sexuality, offering us a chance for freedom, joy, connection, and deep loving sexual ecstasy. **You are sexy, holy, and whole already**, and the following pages show you how to know that for yourself.



## Neuroscience & Sexuality

80% of our perception of the world and what transpires internally from those perceptions is perceived subconsciously. (48) The subconscious is constantly working. This is good, as we could not psychologically handle everything that our subconscious processes. Can you imagine being consciously aware of all your thoughts and experiences? We would have meltdowns daily and couldn't function in the world as rational operating human beings if this were the case. And yet, being unconscious of 80% of our thoughts, experiences, and internal reflections means that we are unaware of most of our pain, emotions, and perceptions or lenses through which we see the world. Perceptions create understandings of our day-to-day interactions, so what we discern is happening may not actually be happening, but we see through the lenses of our previous understanding and experience.

Our emotional systems are built to keep us safe. As a species, we have two drives to keep us alive: a drive devised to react to fear, and a drive devised for calm and connection. (49) The fear drive in the prehistoric world provoked an immediate and overwhelming reaction. To assure survival, primitives needed to escape wild animals, predators, and other primal threats. This drive is "hyper-reactive to any perception of threat, and is responsible for feelings of emotional chaos, stress, and anxiety" in our daily lives. (50) As we go throughout life, this system gets wired to protect us individually, depending on our unique experiences as

humans. Therefore, each intense experience or trauma we have—which results in life-degenerating emotions such as shame, blame, or judgment—will then be categorized as “bad,” or something from which we demand to protect ourselves. When we experience this blame, shame, or judgment, it “only further cements our fear response system, and leads us further from the physiological state of healing,” explains Alane Daugherty, a professor and researcher in the fields of neuroscience and spirituality . (51)

We don't have to repeat the original experience to trigger our brain's fear response to the trauma. In fact, “the greater the original threat was, the more deeply [the emotions] are encoded,” which means instead of the actual event being the trigger, the emotions or feelings felt in that event become the trigger. (52) An initial reaction is stored in our body and a word, action, or experience will trigger a response. Therefore, even if we aren't cognitively aware of the experience, the emotional body of that experience is stored in our body. (53)

The second drive focuses on creating loving connections with others. It is a “calmer” and “more stable drive” with a “desire to bond and connect.” (54) This is the drive that helps us overcome trauma, including sexual trauma. “When we are rooted in our calm and connection system we are not only drawn into attachment and communion with others, and our outer world, we are also more capable of being in communion with our own Inner Being,” writes Daugherty. (55) Through embodied practices, both spiritually and physiologically based, in addition to creating and sustaining positive and nurturing relationships with others and sometimes a Divine presence, we cultivate this second drive so it overrides the fear drive to create healing and safety responses instead of fear and threat responses.

Human beings learn from the emotional state we were in when we first experienced the trauma, event, word, etc. (56) For example, if you grow up hearing your father saying, “I love you,” while simultaneously beating you, you'll equate the idea of “love” with physical punishment. In terms of sexual experiences, your first sexual experiences will most likely be your imprinted understanding and experience of sexuality as a

whole. A young person whose first experience with sexuality was incest or sexual abuse acquires many meanings tied to their sexual self that are most likely incorrect. For example, she may assume the violence was her fault, and therefore internalize shame, fear and blame toward himself. They may feel confused if they had an orgasm in the experience, even if they did not feel pleasure, and therefore associate orgasm with a lack of safety and cut themselves off from experiencing pleasure in future mutual sexual experiences. Or there may be confusion about the idea of love—what does it mean when someone they trust hurt them, yet tells them “I love you”?

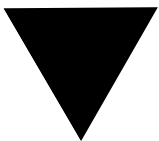
Those who have experienced trauma “keep secreting large amounts of stress hormones long after the actual danger has passed,” explains Van der Kolk. (57) So once the trauma is gone—for illustration, once the child is no longer being abused by her father—the body’s stress hormones are unable to return to baseline. “The continued secretion of stress hormones is expressed as agitation and panic and, in the long terms, wreaks havoc with their health,” creating chronic fatigue, autoimmune disorders, cancer and other health issues. (58) The actual symptoms or manifestations of the abuse and consequent stress in survivors may vary widely, and yet all lead to disassociated feelings and understandings about their sexuality, which are acted out unconsciously in adult life.

Regarding the aforementioned purity culture—a doctrine exploiting fear and shame emotions to “aid” and guide young people with their sexuality and philosophies on sex, love, and relationships—women and LGBTQ persons (and men, though it may manifest differently) learn to repress their sexuality. When their sexuality is aroused, they encounter self-induced shame, blame, and fear based on their understandings and knowledge of what is “proper” and “good.” Christian doctrine focused on sex negativity trains children and young adults to repudiate sex before marriage, that sexual intercourse is sinful, that a woman’s sexuality is dirty and shameful, and most importantly that it is solely females who are responsible for remaining “pure” and “holy.” These messages, whether consciously realized or not, become engrained in our brains.

The brain adopts these “perceptions, behaviors, and choices, that were originally protective in some way” to act out when we are in a situation of wanting to intimately connect with another. (59) Then enters shame, fear, and judgment for acting as a sexual being, having sexual thoughts, attracting a partner of the opposite or same sex, for being anything other than the holy, pure, and untouched sexual being that we were taught to believe is the goal.

The idealization of “purity culture” and an ingrained belief that purity is the holiest and most important aspect of our beings can prevent a healthy, happy sexual life within a loving and kind relationship, because this culture of purity remains embedded in our bodies and minds. Additionally, as mentioned above, if you have deeply rooted shame around your sexuality, you will secrete stress hormones when you encounter a sexual event, act, or experience. These stress hormones trigger your brain’s amygdala, also known as “the seat of our subconscious,” that stores tremendous amounts of data including major experiences that carry strong emotional content. (60) Your amygdala’s inner sense of perception tells you it is dangerous to have sex, experience pleasure, be in love, and to move into the holiness that exists within sacred sexuality.

To further demonstrate the neuroscience behind sexuality, I’m going to offer you concrete examples of how people’s sexualities, including my own, are effected by unconscious shame and guilt. Everyone has their unique personal experiences, and though the stories I list may not be exactly what you’ve experienced in life, I encourage you to apply these neuroscientific learnings into your own understandings of yourself, your sexuality, and your spiritual (or non-spiritual) life.



## Aliah's Story

Many children become sexually curious at a young age. In fact, we are born sexual beings! You’ll often see babies touching their penis or vulva while they’re nursing, getting an intense oxytocin boost from the



breastmilk while simultaneously feeling pleasure in their genitals. There's absolutely nothing wrong with this, and it's completely normal. Yet many children have their hands taken away, or are subtly shamed for unconsciously exploring their bodies simply through following their pleasure instinct.

Like many children, Aliah became sexually curious at a young age. As a 3-year-old she is in the living room bouncing on a ball. She realized this felt pleasurable and, not understanding why, rubs her vulva against the ball in a humping motion. Her mother, previously occupied with folding laundry and watching TV, sees this and reacts harshly, yelling at Aliah to stop because what she is doing is "inappropriate." Not explaining to Aliah what it is she is even doing, or why what she is doing is inappropriate, Aliah's brain begins associating her sexual impulse and the pleasure she was feeling—natural pleasure, pleasure we were made to experience that is supposed to happen within a body—with something bad and forbidden.

Van der Kolk explains how "our earliest caregivers don't only feed us, dress us, and comfort us when we are upset; they shape the way our rapidly growing brain perceives reality." (61) In this situation, this event triggers fear and punishment within Aliah's limbic system's response to impulses of sexual pleasure. Since "our interactions with our caregivers convey what is safe and what is dangerous," Aliah learned that following the pleasure impulse built into her body's makeup was innately unsafe and would lead to embarrassment and shame even though she was not doing anything "wrong" or unnatural. (62) Through associative memory, Aliah now understands that in future scenarios, rubbing herself in this way is shameful. This understanding developed before she understands what sexuality is, or that she is even a sexual being. However, her associative memory reminds her that this sort of self-pleasuring is not okay. Following this event, each time she has an impulse toward sexual pleasure, her limbic brain responds with the same shame and fear created from this original experience.

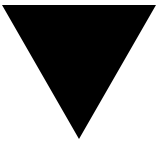
Our emotional brains have three structures that are associated with

meaning-making and emotional perception: the amygdala, the hippocampus and the anterior cingulate. (63) As related in the previous paragraph, the amygdala is especially responsible for storing emotional memory, including events we don't consciously remember, as well as smells, tastes, and sounds. Daugherty describes the amygdala as "a programmable computer deep in our brain, most responsible for the inner nature of perception and what it means to be human." (64) This part of our brain programs how we make meaning of current events and circumstances, though it does not offer us an explanation of the past but rather creates a "felt-sense" within the body based on the current situation. This occurs through biochemical reactions: "any emotional event we experience, all throughout our lives, both large and small, carries with it a biochemical reaction consistent with that event." These biochemicals tell our body how to feel and react to situations based on the original triggers of these biochemicals. Therefore, if we are in a sexual situation, the biochemicals released based on what we've learned about sexuality will tell us how to feel about our experience.

Returning to how neuroscience continues to affect Aliah, she begins to understand sex and sexuality through friends and pop culture (magazines, TV shows, films, Internet), a culture that tells her she needs to be sexualized in order to "fit in," and that her looks determine her self-worth as well as her ability to attract love and friendship. Her parents didn't talk about sex nor did they discuss their own sex life or even show signs of affection in the household. She then attends a church youth group where there is a twelve-week abstinence-only program for sexuality, focused on the teachings of Joshua Harris's book, "I Kissed Dating Goodbye." In this setting she learns about purity culture, and particularly the idea that her sexuality is something that "tempts the boys." She begins to believe the clothing she wears is responsible for the way people treat her, and how she acts and what she says to men will influence what they do to her sexually. Immediately she feels shame and embarrassment about her body, her budding breasts, her vulva and vagina, and her sexuality at large, while simultaneously feeling confused about pop-culture's interpretation of her body and sexuality, in addition to the natural hormonal sexual impulses she feels toward a special boy at school.

As Aliah's sexual pleasure impulses grow stronger, so does her fear and punishment response—a response largely influenced by her cognitive learnings of sexuality and the biochemicals released in association with her sexuality—until numbness sets in. She may vow to never touch herself pleurably again, while getting a purity ring from her church and committing to complete celibacy until marriage. She feels a need to repress her sexuality because “nothing good can come of it,” and she takes on the weight of feeling as though she is responsible for male sexuality, too. While in the youth group, she is also told LGBTQ identifications are a sin, and lusting after anyone of the opposite sex is forbidden. Suddenly she remembers watching her friend Gabriella take off her shirt and how curious she was of her breasts, how it gave her a fluttering feeling in her stomach. Was she committing a sin by looking at her? She becomes plagued with humiliation and guilt over this potential “transgression” and further represses the sexual feelings, not realizing that most young women are curious how other female bodies look, because she lacked education and the opportunity to explore female sexuality.

Each of these experiences forms a belief system about Aliah's sexuality that creates neurological wiring in her brain. “The subconscious is like a vast ‘hard drive’ that has been programmed with all the experiences of our life,” describes Daugherty. (65) Aliah has a sexual hard drive or operating system that catalogues all the experiences listed above, plus the implicit memories she doesn't remember, such as when an older man checked out her breasts at the grocery store, or the time her uncle made a sexual comment towards her body. Because Aliah, like all children, believe her family and society are safe and that tribal belonging is imperative for survival, Aliah's cortex makes sense of these situations and implicit memories by informing her “I am dirty,” “I am worthless,” or “there is something wrong with me,” rather than interpreting society and her family members as threatening or dangerous. Subconsciously she understands her sexuality as something gross and disgusting, and sees herself as innately “bad.” Although the external world influenced these experiences it is her internal experience of shame, blame, and guilt that wires her brain.



## Aspen's Story

Aspen grew up in a relatively insular, Christian environment. She learned the typical purity culture understandings of sexuality, and just accepted that belief system as normal. When she got to college though, she was exposed to a new way of understanding Christianity and sexual ethics. She begins reading books like Margaret A. Farley's *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* and Patrick Cheng's *Introduction to Christian Queer Ethics*. These authors introduce her to new, holistic ways of looking at sexuality and gender within Biblical Christian teachings.

She begins to see that premarital sex may not be a sin after all—that love, connection, and intimacy are holy and if she is with a person she trusts and creates mutual understanding, she may feel ready to share her body with this person through sexual intercourse. During this process, Aspen rewires her cortex. She receives theoretical knowledge about sexuality that is replacing her cortical belief system that sexuality is something bad.

Unfortunately, often just rewiring the cortex and cortical thinking is not enough because it's not a new, embodied understanding of sexuality. Since our "limbic brain will be drawn toward those things it perceives to be life giving, and reactive against those things that it perceives to be life threatening," (66) Aspen still has an ingrained belief that associates her desire with something threatening. A year later Aspen loves a person, allowing her original impulse for sexual pleasure to re-present. These sexual impulses trigger her punishment and fear response in the limbic system and ends up spinning her out. At first the kissing and physical touch excites her, but quickly she shuts down, becomes numb and unresponsive. Aspen doesn't understand why this is happening to her, especially with her new beliefs about sexuality and shame. She recognizes she wants to be sexually active, and yet her body seems to have a different agenda. Daugherty explains how "anytime we have a repeated thought, experience, or interpretation of events, the repeated firing of the neurons, in concert with the glial cells, starts to form long-

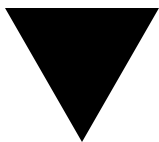
term connections and create our individual operating patterns.” In this situation, Aspen’s programming prevails as the stronger lens—the lens of shame, fear, and judgement—rather than her new cognitive understanding of sexuality and pleasure.

Aspen’s partner internalizes her withdrawal and believes there is something wrong with their relationship, which only increases Aspen’s amount of shame and blame around her sexuality: why can’t she just be “normal” like all the other students around her? Aspen and her partner begin fighting because they can’t seem to understand the root of the issue. She builds both figurative and literal walls around her heart, and eventually the two break-up because they believe there must be something wrong with their connection. Even though Aspen wants to be sexually active—she has consciously chosen this and feels open to sexually engaging with another—she is unable to go through with the act. This experience compounds even more shame and blame around her sexuality, especially considering the messages she receives from media and pop culture.

Each time we have a word, thought (even a subconscious thought), or feeling, that experience is encoded in our body and develops its own synapses pattern. (67) We may not recognize the experience as connected to sexual repression but it may still trigger the code in our body, that further triggers the neurological patterning in our brains, and encodes a deeper pattern into our bodies of resistance and fear around sexual expression. In Aspen’s case, anything that reminded her of her sexual shaming triggered the synapses developed long ago that told her she was doing something wrong.

Joseph LeDoux coined the phrase, “You are your synapses.” (68) We are the way we are wired to be by the patterns that happen in our brains, based on both our external and internal experiences. These wirings culminate through neural nets connecting with other neural nets, or in other words, through associative memory. (69) If Aspen’s neural association is that sex is dirty and wrong—as per what she learned through purity culture—every time she is in a sexual situation, even if

she is married to "the love of her life," she will believe that circumstance to be dirty and wrong. The more she continues to be in sexual situations and pushes herself to perform while still thinking sex is prohibited, the deeper the synapses become entrenched into her hard-wiring. But Aspen doesn't necessarily need to be in the sexual situation for the feelings to arise. For example, if she is at a friend's house viewing a movie with a graphic sex scene, she may feel uncomfortable and dirty. Or, if she walks into her college apartment and hears her roommate having pleasurable sex with her significant other, Aspen may be triggered and respond with anger or other intense, chaotic emotions.



## My Story

The bigger and more traumatic events in our lives create stronger biochemical reactions. Or in other words, the stronger the reaction, the stronger our brains become wired to a pattern based on the biochemicals that are triggered by that reaction. I offered you Aliah and Aspen's stories as examples of how people who have never experienced overt trauma still feel the traumatic side effects of shaming belief systems in their bodies. Yet, more likely than not, you've experienced actual sexual experiences that have been unwanted, coercive, abusive, or violent. When people have these types of violent experiences, the biochemical reaction within the body becomes much stronger, ingraining a freeze, flight, or fight response in the body each time the person is presented with sexual situations.

As I mentioned before, my first experience with abuse was at age three. I then had my first sexual partner at age 15. This person went from being my first kiss to first intercourse in a matter of weeks. Though I was a very sexual pre-teen and extremely curious about sex, I didn't have the right mental or emotional preparation for what sex entailed, nor did I understand how a man should treat a woman, and what a woman should feel sexually with another person. Since my partner was 19-years-old and had at least nine sexual partners before myself, I assumed that he held all the answers to my sexuality. Essentially, I gave my

sexual power away before I had an opportunity to recognize that I possessed it in the first place.

I never really understood the impact of this relationship on my life until I was in my mid-20's. But even so, once this relationship ended my libido took an extreme nose dive into the ground. Since my first unwanted sexual experience was at age 3, I learned that other people—particularly men—controlled my sexuality and how I saw myself. Then since my first chosen sexual experience was as an early teen within a power dynamic run by age and experience, this relationship wired a stronger biochemical reaction within my body making an aversion to sex extremely strong.

But what I began uncovering in my mid-20's was not that it was the relationship itself that messed up my sexual desire and understanding of myself. It was the dogma, slut-shaming, and victim-blaming that surrounded the sexual experience. When I was in the relationship I felt lost and tried to find answers, so I began attending a conservative Baptist youth group who informed me it was my responsibility to end the sexual nature of the relationship to keep both of us pure, and if I asked Jesus Christ into my life as my Lord and Savior, I would then be “Saved” and forgiven, but I could never get back the piece of myself that I lost. I would forever be impure.

This made a deep impact on me. I never grew up with the whole notion of needing to be “saved” as that language didn't exist in my Mennonite community. And I definitely didn't grow up hearing or learning about sex, nor did I have anyone I felt like I could really talk to about it in an open and non-shaming format. So, I took the “advice.” I ended the relationship because I saw there was no way for me to say “no” to the sexual nature of the relationship, since I had no idea how to use my voice in such a way. And I ended up transferring schools to a small Mennonite high school, hoping to leave behind my past and start a new life.

The problem was that I've always been one to wear my heart on my sleeve. Transparency and honesty are high on my list of core values, and

so though I was “starting new,” I still wound up carrying my sexual baggage into this more conservative Christian environment. I was one of the only girls who had sex, and though I told my story in a way that followed the theme of redemption and forgiveness and starting anew, the internalized shame and blame increased as I saw the looks on people’s faces and read the minds of others.

Basically, in most people’s eyes, I was damaged goods. And I really didn’t blame them (and still don’t) for seeing me in such a light, because it’s what we had all been taught. I began hating myself, my life choices, my experiences, and I turned against my sexuality in an even deeper way. I quit self-pleasuring, I shoved away potential suitors. And I gave very strict guidelines as to how far I would go with others sexually (hint: it wasn’t very far past making out).

This is the mini-version of my story. There’s many more layers to tell, but the basic summation of this experience was that though I went into this relationship at 15 feeling sexually explorative and excited, when the sexual experiences were not mutual and I did not know how to express my voice in the situation because I was not taught to speak for my sexual self, I slowly shut down my sexuality. Instead of believing this happened because I didn’t receive proper sex education, I internalized the event and believed the relationship happened because I was too curious, sexual, and explorative. Ultimately, it was all my fault. Then I, much like Aliah and Aspen, internalized shame and fear around my sexuality and began to deeply fear my desire.

The neurotransmitters, a type of biochemical, released by the reaction of these experiences help wire these experiences stronger. The trauma from the abusive nature of the relationship and aftermath of the relationship mentioned above became deeply embedded into my being, making it more difficult for me to open to up to my sexuality and experiences with others. Not only that, but the trauma also began effecting my entire outlook of the world differently. “After trauma the world is experienced with a different nervous system,” writes Bessel van der Kolk. (70) “The survivor’s energy now becomes focused on suppressing inner chaos, at the expense of spontaneous involvement in



their life.” Unfortunately, these attempts at maintaining control over “unbearable physiological reactions” can result in a wide range of symptoms and chronic autoimmune conditions. (71) Not only did I live with the trauma of the original event, but now my entire nervous system was influenced by my brain to focus on survival. My fear drive now worked in overtime while my calm and connection drive was rarely exercised. And I developed an autoimmune disease in my bladder that reflected exactly how much buried pain, shame, and self-hatred existed within my sexual self, while simultaneously making sexual intercourse an undesirable and painful act.

Biochemistry, our neurons, and our neuron wiring alter our entire body, including how our brain operates and functions, as well as influencing illnesses, diseases, and autoimmune conditions. Many believe positive thinking can change a person’s outlook. And yet, when it comes to information that is hardwired into our way of being, just thinking differently isn’t going to change the way our bodies behave. Therefore, reading or studying alternative Christian sexual ethics like Aspen did in college doesn’t work to change a person’s embodied relationship with her sexuality. Ethics are not substandard; ethical thinking is brilliant and needed: theology must be rethought to understand a new, non-judgmental way of being created sexual humans. And yet, upon reading a new sexual ethic and cognitively understanding it, even agreeing adamantly, the experience within our physiology must be rewired for us to embody new truths.

This rewiring cannot happen by merely thinking about it. It must be an authentic, felt experience. Even if the cognitive brain says, “I love sex,” if the body doesn’t believe that statement, it will respond to what is true for the body. We cannot make ourselves feel something we’re not going to feel. If one’s body really knows they don’t love sex, that it makes them feel dirty and shameful when they are in a sexual situation, their body will release biochemicals that prevent liking sex—a biochemical that provokes the fear response system and creates a fight, flight, freeze response in the body. (72)

## EXERCISE: UNDERSTANDING YOUR STORY

When I began reading about neuroscience in Dr. Daugherty's class "Embodied Spirituality: Psycho-Physiology of Contemporary Practice," my mind was blown. Already well immersed in my sexual healing journey at that point, I'd done deep interpersonal work both on spiritual and physiological levels. And yet, I didn't have this scientific backing to understand what was happening inside my body-mind each time I attempted to have sex with my partner, someone I desired to connect with on all levels, yet seemed to have a great aversion to meeting on the sexual plane.

Though Daugherty's book *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness: A Journey of Transformation through the Science of Embodiment* didn't address sexuality, my mind applied all the content and information to my sexual healing. It gave me clarity on why I reacted to sex and intimacy—especially in the context of relationships—the way I did, and how I came about it quite honestly. Therefore, it provided me a platform of compassion and understanding, two key components to healing and transformation.


I spent hours scribbling notes in the margins of the book, finally understanding my deep fear of emotional intimacy being tied to sex, and how all of it was rooted in shame and silence around my sexual experiences as a child and young-adult.

I'm not sure how this information has landed for you. I'm hoping it offered you clarity and understanding for your sexual healing journey, or perhaps gave you insight into past relationships or your partner's experience with their sexuality currently.

Right now, I encourage you to move to the next page to stop and take inventory on how your sexual journey has played out. If you have a printed copy of this ebook, you can even write your notes in the margins. If not, grab a journal and jot your answers down...

## UNDERSTANDING YOUR STORY

- What part of what you read above stood out to you the most? Why?
- Can you imagine why your body-mind responds the way it does to sexual situations?
- What triggers do you see happening for you that release biochemicals that create a fear (flight, fight, freeze) response?
- Can you see connections between your past experiences and your present-day reality?
- What subconscious thoughts may be effecting your sexual life, with yourself and others?
- Finally, offer yourself love, compassion and forgiveness for your journey, for all the experiences you've had in your life leading to this moment of clarity, and for all the times you perhaps neglected your body-mind's messages.



.....

HEALING  
SPIRITUAL  
&  
SEXUAL  
TRAUMA

.....

Now that you've read about how trauma effects your body and sexuality, and you've written up your own conclusions of why you may be shut-down or sexually frustrated, you may be asking, "Now what? Can I actually heal this trauma?"

The answer is yes. I promise you there are ways out of your trauma, shut-down, blockages, and lack of desire. I've been at this journey for nearly a decade and though I admit the question, "Does this sexual healing ever stop?" has been uttered from my lips more than once, I can also tell you that my newfound sense of self, empowerment, pleasure and sensational feeling inside of my body is direct proof that there **is** a way out. The journey might be slow and it's not easy—it takes courage and bravery, but it *does* get easier. The freedom you start feeling is ecstatic, and will only keep propelling you forward to find more!

So how are you going to heal?

There are quite a few modalities to choose from out in the world. Most people start the journey through therapy, reading books, or going to lectures on these topics. These are good starting points, but **intentional experience is actually the only true way to heal**. "Transformation is completely dependent upon experience," writes Daugherty. (73) Trauma in our lives, even as basic as being taught that our sexuality is shameful and against God, creates a stress response that holds us back from experiencing love and connection. Daugherty writes, "The physiologically detrimental effects of anxiety, worry, fear, and other ungrounded emotions are in direct biochemical and neural opposition to positive loving emotions and a sense of inner calm – and it is physically impossible to feel both states at once." (74)

Therefore, learning about God and spirituality in the context of sex shaming does not lead to one having a loving and connective relationship to the Divine. Rather it creates a fear response to the Divine, and thus explains why sexual trauma is not only a physical and emotional trauma, but also a deep spiritual trauma.

Intentional experiences offer an opportunity to connect with the Divine and create an “enlightened or spiritually edified state of being.” (75) They also ground us in the love and connection drive, as opposed to the fear drive, offering us a sense of safety, belonging, and connection needed for transformation and healing. Experiencing an embodied state of being heals physical and psychological trauma, as well as spiritual trauma created by the initial Christian misunderstanding of God as a condemning, anti-sex disciplinarian, an idea that creates disconnection from the Divine and spiritual states of being. Re-connecting to the Divine through new experiences allows one to rewire their sense of sensuality and sexuality within their idea of what is beautiful, Divine, and Holy.

To heal trauma of any sort, we need to find positive contexts to complete the stress cycle that our body originally entered. “Stress is the combination of a perception of threat, and then the all-consuming physical and emotional reactions to that threat,” explains Daugherty. (76) When the stress cycle is not completed, we go into the “I am at risk” stress mode when faced with similar situations as the original trauma—or perhaps not even a similar situation but any situation that creates the same feelings as the original situation. Daugherty describes how “the more threatening the perception, the more chaotic response, and the less likely we are to find any solid emotional ground.” (77) Even in sex with a loving partner, if the partner makes any sort of comment that triggers the stress response, a person is less likely to engage in a loving and mutual sexual partnership, because “our perception of threat is formed by anything that has been threatening to us in the past, and may have little to do with current circumstance.” (78) Creating a positive response during a stress cycle allows the body to move from the thought-line “I am at risk” to the thought-line “I am safe.”

Dr. Emily Nagoski, sex educator and author of *Come As You Are*, explains that “Emotions are like tunnels: you have to walk all the way through the darkness to get to the light at the end.” (79) We cannot expect to heal if our bodies are left hanging in the middle of the tunnel, but we are not taught how to complete our body’s natural stress cycle response in

modern Western culture. “Our culture says that if the stressor isn’t right in front of us, then we have no reason to feel stressed and so we should just cut it out already,” exclaims Nagoski. (80) As a child, we are kept from throwing tantrums, an act that would complete a stress cycle. Many aren’t allowed to express anger, rage, sadness, or grief in healthy ways, and we aren’t offered tools to engage trauma and deep fear responses created by everyday life. “We’ve locked ourselves, culturally, into our own fear, rage, and despair,” observes Nagoski, leaving ourselves in the middle of the tunnel, freezing ourselves in a stress pattern, creating the experience we witnessed earlier, such as in the examples of Aliah and Aspen. (81)

I have written out four main approaches (three adopted from Nagoski and Van der Kolk) that we can take to heal sexual dysfunction, spiritual disconnection and the residual effects of trauma.

**1) Top-Down:** cognitive, thought-based approach, such as talk therapy, “re-connecting with others, and allowing ourselves to know and understand what is going on with us, while processing the memories of trauma;”

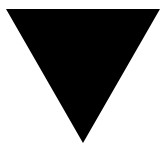
**2) Bottom-Up:** somatic, body-based approach that allows “the body to have experiences that deeply and viscerally contradict the helplessness, rage, or collapse that result from trauma;”

**3) Sideways:** a mindfulness, meditation based approach

**4) Embodied interspirituality:** a combination of top-down, bottom-up, and sideways approaches offered through observing, understanding, learning and experiencing spiritual practices of many traditions throughout the world, while re-interpreting “God,” Divinity, sacredness, holiness, and the broad understanding of religion.

Through neuroplasticity, biochemical regulation, and epigenetics we can experience foundational change in our psychophysiology by engaging in new experiences. (86) Memory reconsolidation—or the ability to associate new experiences and new learning with altered patterns of emotional and implicit memory—changes the sexuality programming learned through Christian and religious teachings and personal experiences with sexuality both in childhood and as an adult.

These four healing approaches offer the possibility to experience something unlike previous results—the possibility to walk through the tunnel and see the light at the other end. All four modalities of healing are important, though they work differently depending on your unique makeup. However, the *best* and most effective approach is a combination of all four in one powerful package.



## TOP-DOWN APPROACH

Top-Down approaches are the most common forms of therapy used currently in the field of psychology and therapy, and are useful in processing and naming the trauma. Some of these methods include cognitive behavioral therapy, cognitive processing therapy, and dialectical behavioral therapy. (88) Often when we experience spiritual, sexual, or emotional abuse, we aren't even aware of naming the experience as abuse, and certainly aren't aware that trauma is stored in our body. Patterns of emotional reaction to trauma exist within and yet we have no idea these reactive patterns are even linked to trauma. "When something reminds traumatized people of the past, their right brain reacts as if the traumatic event were happening in the present," explains Van der Kolk. (89) And yet, since "their left brain is not working very well, they may not be aware they are re-experiencing and reenacting the past—they are just furious, terrified, enraged, ashamed, or frozen." (90)

When working with spiritual trauma, especially in the context of one's sexuality, if a person remains in the spiritual community where the trauma took place, there can be feelings of guilt or shame about having negative feelings toward the community. She may have traumatic episodes toward her loved ones or the community at large, and not understand their origins. Perhaps she concurs with the concept of purity culture, but at the same time experiences frustration and anger from her inability to enjoy sex with her husband. Or a lesbian is still part of her church community because it's loving and supportive, and yet feels trapped and therefore unable to date women, not understanding



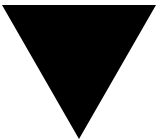
why or how the spiritual trauma is affecting her day-to-day life. Trauma creates fractures and fractures are daunting to face, especially when the result is that the place in which we are supposed to be the safest is, in fact, not safe. If you are recognizing your own trauma through reading this, be gentle on yourself. Offer yourself compassion. Know that it's completely normal to be unaware of trauma and its effects on our body, and hold yourself with the most love you can muster.

Recognizing and naming trauma and abuse is the first step to healing, so if you've done that, congratulations! Recognizing and bringing awareness to sexual shutdown is equally important. All of us carry a neuronal pathway for pleasure. The brain's Limbic system says, "No!" to sex because of fear, but the actual desire for sensual and sexual pleasure still exists underneath the shutdown. Often women are stuck in patterns of muted sex that feels empty, dry, painful, boring, or simply unenjoyable. Since there is no pleasure, sex becomes mechanical. We may assume that is the nature of sex, or that our libido is low, or something is inherently wrong with us. Typically, **we don't assume we've been programmed to respond to our sexuality in a negative, repressed manner.** In this phase, our deep unconscious is controlling our sexual experiences, effecting our ability sexually express and bond with others. For rewiring to occur we must become conscious of our shutdown. When we can speak and acknowledge our shut down, the cortex recognizes it so it becomes conscious and can be addressed. (91)

Understanding the meaning we've created around our trauma, then challenging the belief patterns within that meaning and recognizing our behavioral habits we've trained ourselves into since the trauma, then challenging those patterns is how we take our next vital step towards healing. (92) At this stage talk therapy—or top-down approaches—can create recognition of all the life-degenerative emotions stored in our body and create a loving container with another to fully express those feelings. Cognitive therapy requires us to allow feelings to be recognized. Such an approach assists in seeing habitual self-defensive and self-harming patterns, and opens us up to tap into self-forgiveness for things for which we may still blame ourselves.

To bring forth sexual wholeness, you need to disempower the force of negativity by finding or creating a community that encourages embracing your sexual self. Enfolding yourself in alternative sexual ethics, whether Christian or non-religious, is vital to your continued growth and expression. Often finding a new spiritual community, learning and studying varying views on sexuality within religions, or talk therapy groups around the topic of trauma and sexuality, are conducive in creating new awareness and support.

Your cortex must create a new belief system around sex and embodied pleasure by changing the cortical belief system and addressing “the deep fear of loss of love, safety or belonging by allowing the pleasure to co-exist with the new reality.” (93) A new belief system can be conceived in the context of communal support who actualizes “you are loved, you are safe, and you are whole,” regardless of your previous experiences within community. Engaging and actually loving the fear, as opposed to shunning or turning against fear, can begin rewiring your cortex’s belief system.



## BOTTOM-UP APPROACH

Though the top-down approach reinforces a woman to process and name her experience of sexuality, it’s often not enough for an active state of thriving. Trauma therapist and expert Peter Levine, author of *An Unspoken Voice*, writes “Therapeutic approaches that neglect the body, focusing mainly on thoughts (top-down processing), will consequently be limited.” (94) He deems that traumatized and shut-down persons do not live “in their bodies,” which makes it difficult for them to have “here-and-now contact” with others. (95) However, when their arousal system is stimulated, pulling them “out of immobility and dissociation,” a person can discharge the trauma activation created by the original stress. (96) Bottom-up practices create an experience where the trapped trauma in the body can move itself through the body and generate resolution.

Such practices also apply to those of us who do not live or experience PTSD or active trauma. You still may be haunted, unknowingly, by the aftereffects of trauma. “If the trauma is not recent and is more or less resolved, it’s normal for you to experience residual effects on your sexual functioning, even when you are largely recovered,” offers Nagoski. (97) If you no longer want to have sex with your partner, or you feel disgust and shame around self-pleasuring, you’re most likely encountering some residual effects of trauma. You may not feel like you have trauma, yet you can still be affected. Nagoski continues, “Sexual trauma tends to wrap tendrils around so many parts of your emotional experience that you find it unexpectedly, like a persistent invasive weed that has to be pulled and pulled again.” (98)

Bottom-up approaches allow you to process these “persistent weeds” of stored trauma through and out of your body. Although bottom-up therapies are less understood in mainstream society, they are some of the most effective modalities of healing. I wasn’t able to fully process and release my sexual trauma until I began utilizing somatic, body-based therapy practices like sensorimotor therapy (99), Somatic Experiencing (100), Tension-Stress-Trauma Release (TRE) therapy (101), Biodynamic Breathwork and many other physical modalities that allowed me to work with the organic intelligence of my body in order to heal.

Communal activities such as theater and improv, dancing, yoga, singing, drumming, Tai chi, martial arts (kendo, jujitsu, taekwondo, etc.) also offer cathartic experiences of release within the body, though less directed.

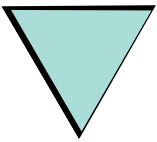
By working within a particular healing framework, the physiological stress stored in the body through trauma can be altered and released. (104)Van der Kolk explains how somatic therapies and embodied spiritual practices, such as those developed by Levine, deeply enrich and aid in healing trauma and altering the embedded cycle of sexual frustration and repression by:

1) drawing “out the sensory information that is blocked and frozen by trauma;”

2) helping people “befriend (rather than suppress) the energies released by that inner experience;”

3) completing “the self-preserving physical actions that were thwarted when they were trapped, restrained, or immobilized by terror.” (105)

Bottom-up approaches can also include touch of the body, either offered by a practitioner or executed by the person. Van der Kolk reveals, “Touch, the most elementary tool we have to calm down, is proscribed from most therapeutic practices. Yet you can’t fully recover if you don’t feel safe in your own skin.” (106) Many sexual “problems” and “roadblocks” in relationships stem from unprocessed physiological stress. Therapeutic bodywork for traumatized individuals is one approach to release this stress and forge space for new movement. In an interview with Bessel van der Kolk, Licia Sky explained that “Mindful touch and movement grounds people and allows them to discover tensions that they may have held for so long that they are no longer even aware of them. When you are touched, you wake up to the part of your body that is being touched.” (107)



## Therapeutic Pussy Massage

Mindful touch may be applied to the area traumatized inducing an even greater and deeper healing effect, if the survivor feels ready. Somatic sexual therapy or therapeutic vaginal massages, sometimes known as yoni or pussy massages, are one form of body-work that releases trauma from a woman’s vulva and pelvic floor. These massages can be done by a partner or trained professional practitioner, and with the right guidance you can even give yourself a similar massage utilizing your hands or a crystal dildo designed for vaginal healing (see exercise at end of section).

This type of somatic healing utilizes body memory, as there is cellular trauma stored in the vagina that can only be released with physical

touch. First, one must be in a semi-sexually aroused state, so these massages typically begin with a full body massage and sensual touch. When someone is sexually stimulated and in a state of pleasure “there are 12 known hormones and chemicals that are released in the brain that in a healthy state of arousal are deeply beneficial to the body,” Rahi Chun, a somatic sexual therapy practitioner explained to Kimberly Nichols in *The Radical Healing Power Of Somatic Sexual Wholeness Therapy*. (108) If these hormones are released in negative circumstances such as rape or sexual assault, or if they’re associated to negative wiring around arousal like in the case of Aliah or Aspen, those hormones trigger traumatic emotions rather than sexual pleasure.

To rewire sexual experiences, the key is to have someone experience the process of being triggered “within a state of safely embodied presence so that your brain can rewire its connection to arousal while simultaneously releasing embedded trauma.” (109) While in this state, a woman can pinpoint exactly the location of pain or tension in her pelvic body. Often this pain or numbness is concentrated in a specific area, for example at the vaginal opening, cervix, or g-spot, and it signifies “pockets of frozen trauma or repressed emotions that may or may not be sexual in nature.” (110)

Sky explained to Van der Kolk that when giving a traumatized person a body massage, “You have to meet their point of resistance—the place that has the most tension—and meet it with an equal amount of energy.” (111) This is the same process as in a yoni massage, although in this modality the person giving the massage will hold light pressure on the area of the vagina where they feel the resistance and embedded tension. Through this process Chun explains to Nichols, “a past trauma that has bypassed the conscious and often limbic brains, now gets re-visited, but in a safe container where all three parts of the brain [the conscious/cognitive brain, the limbic brain, and the brain stem] are online again.” (112)

Unreleased trauma causes the body’s nervous system to remain in a state of contraction so the body believes the trauma occurs in the present even though it could be decades ago. “Once a “dual awareness”

occurs, however—where one can experience the sensations and feelings related to the past trauma, but remain fully present and feel a safety while experiencing this—the nervous system can expand again and unfreeze. The conscious, limbic, and brain-stem together conclude that this trauma is no longer happening,” explains Nichols. (113)

When a woman pin-points the site of her pain, she can concentrate on that area and reveal the wound or hurt that prevents her from experiencing sexual pleasure. By “de-arming”—a process of sounding out the pain, giving it expression through her voice, gurgles, or shaking a part of her body—the pain and trauma is released, completing the stress cycle. Van der Kolk describes how “Movement helps breathing to become deeper, and as tensions are released, expressive sounds can be discharged.” (114) After moving through this process, a woman can gradually experience pleasure in that area of the body instead of the previous pain or numbness.

## EXERCISE: SACRED & HEALING PUSSY MASSAGE

First you want to set up a comfortable and safe space for you to do this exercise. Make this space into a sacred nook for you and your yoni. Decorate it with candles, flowers, incense, essential oils and whatever else makes you feel like you're held in a sacred space. Find a blanket, mat or any other bottom layer that feels special, clean and unique for you and your sexuality practices.

You also want the room to be warm or at least comfortable for nudity, and make sure you have some form of privacy (lock the door, let others in know not to disturb you or maybe even wait until you get a space alone so you're not nervous about someone else disturbing you).

What else you need on hand:

- Body Oil (unscented, natural) I recommend organic coconut oil OR Lube (natural) such as Pjur brand, or something homemade
- Towels to lie down on and clean up with, if needed.
- Music Playlist (optional).

You want to begin by turning your body on. It's not necessary to be extremely turned on, but you want to get your sexual energy flowing and your vulva excited.

Start slow and give your body pleasure. Warm coconut oil up in your hands by rubbing them together and then touch your body, letting the oil sink into your skin and really giving yourself the kind of touch your body craves.

When you feel the timing is right, move to your vulva and place your hands over your beautiful pussy. Ask her permission to touch her, and listen for the answer. If you hear a "yes," the proceed. If you hear a "no," respect that and come back another day. If you hear a "maybe," explore that and see if you can get to a yes without being pushy. If you push, the answer will most likely be a no.

If you receive a yes, then put more coconut oil on your hands and begin massaging the outer and inner thighs, the vaginal lips and the butt.

Take your time with this and really explore your body, like you're touching it for the first time. Treat it like a prayer, and infuse your hands with what you deem as "Holy" energy.

Once the outside of your vulva feels warmed up and you feel like you're producing some natural lubrication, proceed to your clitoris and allow yourself to get stimulated. Don't bring yourself to orgasm (though if you do, it's ok!), but rather allow yourself to experience the sensations of pleasure. Once you feel pleasure in your body, ask permission to explore inside your vagina and only proceed if you hear a yes.

Start at the entrance of your vagina. Hold your index fingers on the top of your vaginal opening and feel into the sensation. What does it feel like? You may notice resistance, pain, numbness or stuck emotions or surfacing. Breathe deeply into these areas, wherever you feel pain. Really focus on that sensation and allow yourself to give it a sound. Maybe start moaning, or making something that resembles a song. There's no "right or wrong" sound, but allow yourself to organically approach the noise that this pain, resistance or numbness wants to produce. Continue holding in that area of your vagina until you feel a release.

Then move to the bottom of your vagina. Do the same thing as above with this area.

Proceed to both sides of your vagina. You can also move in a clockwise direction, beginning at the top and moving through each area of the entrance of your vagina.

Then if it feels right continue to inside the vagina. Move to your g-spot or even your cervix (which you might not be able to reach with your hands depending on your body -- you can use a crystal wand if you wish to explore without your hands).

Keep breathing, sounding and allowing your body to move. If you feel a sensation to kick or scream, allow yourself to do this! It's cathartic for your body to release what is stuck inside your yoni.



Never push yourself too far. Only go as far as your body is open to you going. Really listen and tune in to what your body needs.

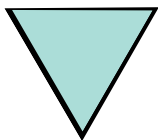
Also know that you can always resource. If at any time you have a traumatic flashback or you have pain that feels unbearable, scan inside your body or call upon a Divine figure (God, saint, the goddess, an angel, etc.) to help support you and hold you. At any time you're always able to tap into the resources you need.

When you feel like you've had a release, for example a torrential downpour of tears or you've completed a screaming session, give yourself pleasure. Stroke your skin. Curl up in a ball. Smell an essential oil. Take a bath. Offer yourself the pleasure you need to recalibrate your nervous system and reassure your body that this is good, beautiful and needed for your healing.

Healing takes time. You're never going to cure yourself through one magical pussy massage. Each time you approach your body, come as if it's the first time and without expectation. Really give yourself a safe container to feel into. And be so compassionate, loving, patient and kind with yourself and your process.

It might not look like how you want it to look, or you might not feel what you want to feel. None of that matters. What matters is that you continue to **hold yourself**, sending yourself loving thoughts and affirmations, and accepting whatever rises to the surface.

If at any time this feels like too much or you need extra guidance, please reach out to me or any other sexuality and/or trauma healing specialist. This process ought to be a gentle and kind one, not forced or rushed. It's an opportunity to lean into yourself, to meet your body in a way you never have before and to offer yourself some healing in your sexuality. It's definitely beneficial to have someone to talk with through the process though, so please do not hesitate to get the support and help you need!



## Somatic Sexual Practices

Just like you might meditate, pray or engage in other spiritual practices daily, you can also engage your sexuality in the same way on a daily basis. I have found that having a daily sexual self-care ritual has been tremendously healing for my sexuality and growing into my wholeness. The possibilities of practices are nearly endless, and each is designed to work with particular aspects of yourself, such as gaining emotional wholeness, working through trauma, finding pleasure and sensuality, experiencing yourself as an orgasmic goddess superstar(!), moving your sexual energy so you can utilize it for your health or creativity, and so much more.

In terms of healing your sexuality, you don't **have** to do hands on touching (pussy massage) to remove your sexual blockages. Levine's work in *Waking the Tiger* explains why the act of shaking to release trauma is a deeply healing modality. When studying animal behavior, Levine noticed that after an animal received a great shock or trauma in the wild—for example, a gazelle who survived an attack of a lion—when the traumatic experience itself was completed, the animal would shake its body. In this process of shaking, the animal released the trauma to become fully functional and fluid again. (115)

Humans have similar impulses, and yet we often don't follow through. Levine points out that "When confronted with a life-threatening situation, our rational brains may become confused and override our instinctive impulses." (116) Instead of completing the cycle, we freeze in fear, therefore carrying the trauma within our bodies, fixed to our way of being in the world, allowing it to create "a wide variety of symptoms e.g., anxiety, depression, and psychosomatic and behavioral problems." (117) Levine further elaborates, "These symptoms are the organisms way of containing (or corralling) the undischarged residual energy." (118)

Somatic sexual practices offer you the opportunity to restore your

sexuality, assisting in moving through shame, guilt, and judgment complexes created by purity culture, abuse, and society at large, to the holistic opening of a sense of pleasure and desire in your body. Taoist and Hindu Tantra traditions offer hundreds of practices that encourage sexual healing for women. (119) Minke de Vos in *Tao Tantric Arts for Women* explains that the practices are ancient, going “back to the oldest sex manuals in the world, the Chinese Handbooks of Sex and Tao of Love Coupling, written five thousand years ago by the legendary Yellow Emperor, Huang-Ti.” (120) Though the modality is ancient, much like yoga in the west, modern adaptations of the somatic sexual practices currently integrate systems of neuroscience, meditation, and therapy to create a cohesive product for today’s population.

Somatic sexual practices can directly engage suppression of God, divinity, and religion. “Throne of the Heart,” a practice originally learned from Layla Martin, allows you to welcome limiting belief systems and fragmented pieces of yourself to your heart, embracing these parts of yourself in a loving vessel and allowing them to be present as you self-please. While self-pleasuring you ask yourself, “What is keeping me from my full pleasure in this moment?” Then allow whatever voice, sub-personality, or memory to surface that offers wisdom to discover the barriers. When I first engaged in this practice I directly worked with my spiritual trauma. I then took the practice and reframed it specifically for religious shame and guilt.

When I did this practice, and asked myself what was keeping me from fully diving into my pleasure, I was visited by an image of Jesus Christ and my dead ancestors. They entered the room as I was self-pleasuring, and at first I was a little surprised. And let me be clear, when I say they entered my room I really mean their spirits were there in the most esoteric and otherworldly way possible, in my full sexy presence. After I got over the initial embarrassment, it suddenly dawned on me that my entire life I had been terrified to masturbate because I was convinced that both Jesus and my dead grandpa, grandma, and aunt were watching and disappointed in me. I always felt a subtle level of shame, like I was doing something horribly wrong and these people in my lineage were judging me from the other side.

Through inviting them into the room and space while I self-pleasured, I ended up having a conversation with them in which they encouraged me in my sexual healing work that I'm engaging both for myself and the world at large. Jesus then lead me through a self-healing process for my interstitial cystitis, an autoimmune disease in my bladder that causes pelvic pain and discomfort. Through this somatic sexual healing practice, I tapped into my own body's healing wisdom and experienced self-pleasure in a way I never could before, because I embraced my fear of Jesus and ancestors witnessing me and instead allowed them to be loving towards me, which therefore allowed myself to be loving as well. This example indicates how this practice can be healing for anyone who suffers from religious, familial, or cultural shame around their sexuality.

Such feelings about sexual anatomy and sexuality at large often is caused by a disconnect between the non-sexual body and the sexual regions of the body. Many somatic sexual practices cultivate deep self-love and respect for yourself and body, developing a pleasurable relationship to sensation and sexuality. These practices may open energy channels in the body, similar to acupuncture and acupressure. (122) Other practices work with particular areas of the body, for example utilizing breast massage to open the heart, manifesting a foundation of self-love. Physiologically, breast massage releases oxytocin, which develops the feelings of love and connection to one's self, one's body, and therefore with others. (123)

Many practices target healing in particular areas of the body, supporting the kidneys or balancing the hormonal structure. (125) Other practices develop sexual pleasure, empowering sexual vitality and multiorgasmic capacities. (126) Practices can involve a combination of breath work, meditation, massage, visualization, movement, and sounding. Other practices may work with the womb and ovaries, an important area for women contemplating pregnancy, or to develop creativity. (124)

Somatic sexual practices also create increases of oxytocin—a human peptide hormone—in the body, one of the most powerful brain chemical's in the human body. The purpose of oxytocin is to create a sense of bonding. Breastfeeding a baby, eating chocolate, or engaging in

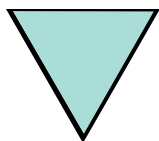
sex and reaching orgasm—as long as the environment is healthy, safe, trusting, and loving—produces oxytocin. Yet, if “bonding does not take place competing biochemicals can cause feelings of emptiness, loneliness, loss or depression.” (127)

Therefore, when you've experienced an unpleasant sexual experience—perhaps a hook-up where you felt used, an abusive relationship, or negative thoughts when masturbating—instead of having an oxytocin rush of contentment and trust during orgasm, other biochemicals flood the body and the experience becomes uncomfortable. Oxytocin performs as a healing serum from the body and so damaged oxytocin response systems can be healed and cultivated through conscious and intentional nurturing behaviors, somatic sexual practices, loving intimate relationships, positive sexual encounters, and by creating loving and trusting attachments both with oneself and with others. (128)

I have also found that a relationship to nature is a vital component to somatic sexual practices—connecting yourself to the moon, sun, trees, or any other natural aspect for “cosmic nourishment.” Not only do these practices create a spiritual sense of well-being, awe, and connection, but they also physiologically heal the trauma stored inside your body.

All healing and transformation takes time. Though some of these practices may be an instant fit for you, many of them must be developed over time. A practice may need to be attempted for 21 days before you can achieve sensations of pleasure. Depending on your conditioning and internal programming, the practices may be very uncomfortable at first. But after developing a daily practice ritual or working 1-on-1 with a coach, deep transformation, healing, and a positive relationship to pleasure and sexuality is the reward.

If you're interested in learning more somatic sexual practices, I recommend checking out my weekly YouTube videos or reaching out for 1-on-1 coaching where we can tailor the practices for your needs.



## Jade Egg

The number one tool I've used on my sexual healing journey is the jade egg. The jade egg—a piece of jade stone cut in the shape of an egg—is a Taoist tool to bolster female sexual wholeness. A hole is drilled through the stone and it's strung with silk string or floss so it can be placed inside the vagina where somatic sexual practices are done to cultivate female sexual energy and create healing and wholeness. It's sort of like yoga for the vagina!

Recently in pop culture, unfounded discussion criticizes the safety and necessity of the jade egg and accuses the modality as being nothing but “snake oil.” I'd love to refute those claims though, as many women (including myself) have received tremendous healing benefits through working with this practice. Some of these benefits include removing sexual shame and self-hate, and replacing it with a loving acceptance and connection to one's vagina. (130)

Jade egg practices have been used for thousands of years and were initially developed long ago by the three female advisors of the Yellow Emperor, explains Vos. (131) Jade egg practices do a wide range of things for women, including: strengthening the pelvic floor, activating vital hormones, relieving PMS, massaging reflexology zones of the vital organs within the yoni, preventing incontinence, toning the facial skin, toning the vaginal canal and g-spot, enhancing sexual satisfaction and pleasure and orgasm, and helping women become in touch with the felt sense within her vagina while localizing particular parts of the body. (132) These practices use an “integration of awareness, touch, movement, sound, and breath” that leads to an “endless discovery of ourselves as creative, sexual beings.” (133)

One deeply healing jade egg exercise created by Layla Martin is called “Sexual Wholeness.” (134) This practice utilizes Levine's “shaking” method to allow trauma healing to occur, even if one is unconscious of the actual trauma. A woman raises herself in a yogic “bridge” pose, with her knees bent and hips raised above the ground, while her shoulders and head

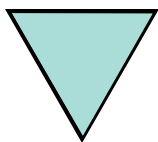
remain on the ground. As she raises into the position, she takes a deep inhale. She then flexes her vaginal walls together, creating a tight grip around the egg, and proceeds to hold her breath as long as she can. When she can no longer hold her breath, she slowly exhales as she lowers her body to the ground and then repeats a few more times.

This exercise creates the right conditions that the body, legs, and pelvic region begin to tremble and shake. Often cathartic emotional releases ensue, as emotions are bound up inside the previously physically restricted body. Van der Kolk explains that “People spend enormous energy on holding back their tears—or any sound or movement that might betray their inner state [...] When physical tension is given a space to release, then a person’s emotions—even emotions left from a childhood wound—can release.” (135)

Once the woman has completed the shaking portion of the practice, she is guided to do whatever feels natural to her body to protect herself. This may include kicking, punching, screaming, curling up into a ball, or any number of other reactions. Through this process, she can complete any stress cycles locked in the freeze, flight, or fight positions, so her body can feel comfortable and safe protecting her in the future, as well as open her up to vulnerability in sexual situations. In this practice, a woman can release religious, spiritual, sexual, and emotional trauma, and the internalized effects of that trauma, whether she is cognitively recognizing the trauma or not.

These types of practices are excellent if you have a sense of being sexually traumatized but don’t remember an event, or if you carry sexual shaming baggage and want to release it, but don’t necessarily have a specific story or experience. Jade egg practices offer a method for women to become comfortable with penetration, especially if they have pain or fear surrounding sex. Inserting an egg into her body, self-pleasuring, and focusing on sexual healing work creates an environment in which the body gradually feels safe to engage in sexual expression and pleasure. If you’d like to learn more about the jade egg, I recommend checking out one of my live workshops, online masterclasses or signing

up for my Sacred, Sexy & Whole Group Intensive or my 1-on-1 Sacred Sexual Awakening Coaching Program.



## Purification vs. Pleasure

You've now read a lot about how to heal sexual trauma through somatic exercises. Something vital to keep in mind though is the all important Pleasure/Pain Healing Rule. I'm a "go big or go home kind" of gal, so when I first set-out to heal my sexuality through somatic work I went ALL out. What I quickly realized though is that this is not the kindest or gentlest way to heal, nor is it the most helpful.

Re-traumatization is an important aspect to pay attention to when utilizing somatic sexual practices for trauma. There exists a "path of pleasure" and a "path of purification." Most people in the West think of sexuality as only a pleasure path, when our sexuality is also built to become a purifying force—something that allows us to release stuck emotions, toxins, and pain. And yet, when we are healing our sexuality it is important we don't get stuck on the path of purification only, believing our identity is that of a purifier and there exists no opportunity for pleasure within our body.

For example, this can happen if you become too focused on doing yoni massages without offering a pleasurable experience afterward.

"Pleasure" is not defined as orgasm; it can be going out dancing with friends, or even something as simple as sniffing an essential oil or cuddling with a lover. It is important to do twice as many pleasurable things in conjunction with purification exercises to ensure you do not become identified with the idea that you're permanently broken and need to be fixed.

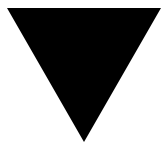
Sometimes somatic sexual practices trigger a stress response. When we are experiencing the stress cycle—the fight, flight, freeze process—it is important to complete the cycle. If we become stuck in one of those



responses during a practice (or in our daily life), especially the freeze response in the form of resistance, then we may begin to identify with the idea that we are broken, permanently damaged, or unable to become a sexual and embodied being. We need to complete the emotional triggers to return to a place of knowing “I am safe.”

These emotional triggers don't have to be completed in ways that are re-traumatizing. You can continue with the practice while embracing yourself, your pain and fear, welcoming all of it into a safe container. If at any moment you feel you're forcing yourself to feel pleasure, or you feel enmeshed with the pain, then you can back off the practice and instead offer kindness, love, and compassion to your body. It's important to always deeply focus on resourcing safety and love within your body. I recommend a very slow process of trauma release, also known as titration, and never push yourself past your limits.

Through doing these somatic sexual practices and creating a daily self-pleasure routine, you slowly build and strengthen neuronal pathways that are constructive to your desire for pleasure and a happy sex life with people you love, including yourself. As you build up the neuronal pathways that are pleasurable and constructive to ecstasy, you simultaneously weaken the neuronal pathways that no longer serve you. When I guide people through trauma releasing practices, I simultaneously guide them through nurturing practices that really strengthen and sooth the nervous system. Doing simple nurturing practices after a somatic releasing exercise—like taking a bath with essential oils, eating chocolate, or dancing to music in a candle lit room—can really help reprogram your nervous system for deeper levels of self-love, healing, and wholeness.



## SIDEWAYS APPROACH

The sideways or meditative approach is one of the most indirect approaches, and yet offers gentle healing without addressing the trauma head-on. Nagoski and Van der Kolk refer to meditation as the

mindfulness approach, which B. Alan Wallace in *Mind in the Balance: Meditation in Science, Buddhism, and Christianity* describes as “a state in which one is acutely aware of and focused on the reality of the present moment, accepting and acknowledging it, without getting caught up in thoughts about or emotional reactions to the situation.” (136) Through this process, the trauma gradually makes its way to the surface, sometimes through distinct memories, but often through felt-sense or emotional releases.

By focusing on present awareness—as opposed to being consumed by the past or the future—a person can drop into an awareness of their human self, rooted on this earth, witness their thoughts, emotions, motives, and desires, and offer compassion and love as opposed to fighting or resisting the feelings. Kolk explains that “At the core of recovery is self-awareness.” (137) By developing consciousness and awareness to feelings of shame, blame, judgement, and inadequacy, mindfulness practices can be a helpful tool when re-wiring sexuality. Recognizing that the deep core of being is not the brokenness or jealousy or sinfulness, is essential when creating a new belief system. Meditation and contemplative practices offer a deeper perspective, encouraging experiences to come and go. A person reprogramming their sexuality won’t cling tightly to the false beliefs if they learn meditation tools to guide them into release and acceptance.

Scientific studies discovered that in many cases meditation contributes to “reductions in depression, chronic anxiety, negative emotions (such as irritation, frustration, and hostility), and compulsive thinking,” while increasing positive attributes like “patience, empathy, affection, and compassion, mindfulness, attentiveness to others, and more restful sleep.” (138) Additionally, when a person who meditates regularly is triggered, they can return to an emotional equilibrium more easily than a person who does not meditate. (139) Nagoski explains that the sideways approach to healing is “a way of simply noticing a weed and then deciding if you want to water it or not, pull it or not, fertilize it or not.” (140) If you choose not to nurture the weed of trauma, then it gradually disappears.

Though mindfulness meditation is one effective method, there are many forms of meditation that can be used as a healing modality. Some of these take a more embodied path, so are a cross between bottom-up and sideways approaches. Internal Family Systems, or IFS, is a form of therapy created by Richard C. Schwartz led by a trained practitioner or practiced individually in a meditative state. Unlike other therapy, this approach offers a window into self-understanding and self-leadership in a holistic, non-pathologizing and contemplative setting. IFS enhances understanding of the inner self by responding to inner dialogues in a loving and compassionate way.

People are instructed to witness or listen inside themselves for different “parts” (feelings/thoughts/subpersonalities) who are responding to a situation in a specific manner. By listening to the individual parts in an open and inviting fashion, a person recognizes past hurts, judgments, situations and pain they’ve been holding on to, in return allowing them to unburden their emotions bound to the situation or event. IFS offers a window of opportunity to re-frame events and situations, while addressing sub-personalities created by the original trauma. (141)

Another effective meditative therapy is “Focusing,” a contemplative method of awareness—both learned and natural—that involves “tapping into your vast emotional intelligence through the message of your body.” (142) Dr. Eugene Gendlin originally developed the modality, while Ann Weiser Cornell and Barbara McGavin’s took the process further, detailing their methods in *The Radical Acceptance of Everything: Living a Focusing Life* with the premise that the subconscious brain is more connected to the body than to the conscious brain. Therefore, Focusing is a practice that grasps the central nervous system and allows the subconscious brain an opportunity to bring up and release feelings or emotions for which there are not words.

The first step to Focusing is finding the “felt sense,” meaning a body sensation that has a deeper meaning and allows one to access or understand an emotion or experience. The felt sense is unique: it is not a thought or an emotion, but rather a visceral body experience. When paying attention to felt sense, it will feel different every time one feels it.

For example, the experience of disappointing a partner is felt differently than the experience of disappointing a pastor. Both are experiences of disappointment, but with the partner one may feel an ache in their heart region, whereas with the pastor they may feel the ache in their stomach. Operating from pure emotions, all one may register is disappointment. But when using the technique of “felt sense,” one can actually distinguish the feeling of the emotion leading to a deeper discovery of why that emotion is aroused.

The Focusing method acts as a deep form of somatic knowing, a result of the central nervous system. Performing a body scan is a useful way to delve into the felt sense. (\*See exercise at end of this section for details) In this process, you notice and speak the sensations in your body out-loud. Speaking the sensation, as well as the location you're feeling it in, promotes cognitive recognition. This level of cognitive recognition teaches you to tune into the felt sense on a day-to-day basis so it can be done not only in a meditative posture, but also when having a conversation or engaging with another sexually. Once you have identified the “felt sense,” you can offer engaged, accepting inner attention toward this part of you. This means sitting with the felt sense, letting yourself experience the emotions that arise, and feeling the sensations express through your body. Experiencing the emotions can lead to accepting them rather than wishing to expel the feeling.

“Making steps” is the second step to Focusing, which means allowing the inner world to unfold, letting it offer the next steps in understanding the felt sense. The idea behind this is that the felt sense shifts, evolves and changes on its own, in its own way. Allowing yourself to understand the experience that created the felt sense—the words that go along with the perceptions of experience, the emotions, the understandings of the practice—all incased in a compassionate container of acceptance and curiosity are all potential aspects of “making steps.”

For example, in the case of a woman’s sexuality if the felt sense occurred in her vagina, she can place her hands over it and ask, “What would you like to say?” She can then speak out loud the message offered by her vagina. She may sense a tightness, begin a conversation, and discover

that the tightness relates to a condensing comment once made by a lover. She can then hold that comment and lovingly experience the new message from her vagina that she is whole and beautiful.

The third quality of Focusing “is a radical philosophy of what facilitates change.” This change is not a coerced change, or a “doing” change; it is a “being” change, one in which we assume “that change and flow is the natural course of things and when something seems not to change, what it needs is attention and awareness, with an attitude of allowing it to be as it is, yet open to its next steps.” (143) Focusing perceives a wisdom in the body in which the felt sense guides change and the direction of what it needs to become next. We never actually have to make it change. With focused and compassionate attention directed towards it, the change will arise spontaneously.

Many imaginative meditative exercises facilitate sexual, spiritual and trauma healing through transformation of emotional states. The brain doesn’t recognize the difference between an imagined, deeply felt emotion, and an actual occurrence in present time. Therefore, if a person moves through a powerfully imaginative exercise where they achieve the “felt sense” of an emotion, sensation, feelings, or experience—for example, the feeling of unconditional love—the meditative exercise is just as powerful as the experience in “real” life. (144)

Some of these practices are in the moment, and cultivate an attitude desired for a brief period of time. Others are practices that, if done daily, transform a person’s general attitude or outlook on life, moving the person from a victim mentality to a thrive mentality. Daugherty calls these “Intentional Affect Practices,” as the goal is the affect the body’s state of being. These practices engage the limbic system directly, training it “to be more adept at operating from that affect.” (145) Research also shows that “specific states of affect go directly to the amygdala to calm the whole system.” (146) This means that we can train ourselves to feel a particular outlook, cultivating it over time, and thereby adapting it into our implicit memory, shifting our associative memory patterns. For someone enduring disassociated love and sexuality, or who lives with disconnection, pain, and separation in their sexual relationships, the

practices can deeply enhance their sexual life by training their body to respond positively to self-pleasure, sex, love, and tribal belonging.

One practice is “Attitude Breathing,” created by Daugherty: First you calm your emotional system by breathing deeply and employing relaxation techniques, determining if you’re engaged in any thought, reactivity, or distraction, allowing your body to disengage and instead focus on the breath and general feelings of relaxation. While focusing on a breathing pattern, inhale the felt sense of the ideal emotional shift into your body. This emotional shift could be happiness, relaxation, love, safety or any other desired state of being. Sometimes an image assists, for example, imagining Divine light streaming through the body system, relaxing each body part as the light touches every cell. You must root yourself into the felt sense, the actual feeling of, say, relaxation and love throughout your entire body. It is best to maintain this breathing and emotional felt-sense pattern for 15 to 20 minutes. If you lose focus, bring yourself back to the breath and felt sense or image of the emotional state.

Daugherty explains, “The shift to breathing a ‘felt sense’ of the desired attitude actually shifts our biochemical state to one consistent with that attitude, and thus creates a perception consistent with the shift.” (147) The result can be the healing of your sexuality by imaging deep unconditional love while embodying your sexual self, either through self-pleasure or by imagining yourself as a sexual being. When you explicitly focus on your sexual self being loved unconditionally, the previous conditioning that your sexual self is dirty, shameful and disgusting will slowly erode—the fear drive will stop taking over, as your love and connection drive strengthens. With sustained practice, you can learn to generally live within the love and connection drive, as opposed to the fear drive, when connecting to your sexuality.

Breathwork is an important aspect to the sideways approach. “Learning how to breathe calmly and remaining in a state of relative physical relaxation, even while accessing painful and horrifying memories, is an essential tool for recovery,” states Kolk. (148) When triggered, our autonomic nervous system (ANS) activates. More specifically, the

sympathetic nervous system (SNS) interacts with emotions and is on high alert. Breathing slowly and calmly relieves the parasympathetic system, slowing and relaxing our entire body by allowing the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) to suppress the arousal. Breathing in meditative states develops control of the autonomic systems within our body. Additionally, working with our breath in meditation, we can then transfer that experience into love-making—when one becomes triggered during sex, she can use the breathing tools and grounding techniques to once again become aware of the present moment. Breathing allows one to feel a level of safety that may not normally be accessible during sexual situations. Registering the PNS through breathwork develops one’s love and connection drive, as opposed to triggering the fear drive.

Hundreds of variations exist for the use of breath in meditation. A simple exercise is to count to 10 on every inhale, and reverse counting from 10 on the exhale, remaining focused on the breath. When a thought interrupts, bring yourself back to the breath. Breathwork can also be used to specifically access and pinpoint parts of the body. For example, “Heart Breath” requires use of a connected breath with a fast inhale through the nose, and a fast exhale through the mouth. This breathing pattern promotes connection with the heart and a “flow state” of love. It also oxygenates the body and eliminates some of the cortical control to which we’re often addicted. By removing even a portion of the cortical brain’s grasp on us, we can feel more sensitized to our body and tap into the felt sense of whatever area we’re pinpointing—in this example, the heart. Often emotions will come to the surface, and the breathing pattern helps one explore their heart in a more profound and connected mode. This exercise assists a woman who wants to improve her relationship to her sexuality, by tapping into her feeling body while creating a sense of calm and connection to her sexuality, as opposed to the fear drive kicking in to resist her sexuality. (149)

This small sampling of meditative exercises demonstrates how one can repair a damaged relationship to one’s sexuality, spirituality, and community. Meditative exercises ranging from energy work to mantra chanting to shamanic journeying are also curative. What works best for

one person may be completely different from the best practice for another person. All meditative/contemplative exercises can help one to “develop a psychophysiological capacity for growth.” (150) Though each practice may target a precise area of growth, “because of the complex interplay of brain integration and the re-encoding of all types of behavioral learning, memory reconsolidation likely takes place with all forms of contemplative [meditative] practice, it just uses different mechanisms for the reconsolidation process,” details Daugherty. (151)



## EXERCISE: BODY SCAN MEDITATION

This meditational practice is so simple and yet so powerful! It helps heighten sensitivity in your sexual center, helps you feel more in your body, allows you to get out of your mind and listen to your body's truth and intuition.

1) Lay down in a comfortable position and create a sacred space around you if that helps.

2) Set an intention or say a prayer of guidance for the practice, something like, "I am open to receiving insight into my body, connecting deeply to sensation, while allowing myself to be aware, present and focused.

3) Scan your body for any sort of sensation that you're experiencing. A sensation is cool/warm, dry/wet, mobile/still, contracting/expanding rather than an emotion or a thought.

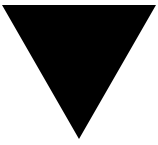
4) Speak the sensations out loud, and keep scanning the body until a new sensation arises and speak that out loud. Continue in this pattern for at least 5 minutes (it can help to set a timer).

Sensations can be as simple as, "I have a tickle in my right toe," or "I feel a slight pressure in my left temple," or "I feel a tingling in my vagina."

4) If you have a strong emotion or thought pattern, you can speak that, but keep returning to sensations.

5) If you feel "nothing" then keep scanning for sensations - they are there and you will feel them once you become sensitive enough with practice.

6) Finish the practice by allowing yourself to rest and integrate what you've experienced in your body. Allow yourself to lay with your eyes closed. Put your hand over your heart and thank yourself for this gift.



## EMBODIED INTERSPIRITUALITY

Our bodies are one of the greatest spiritual and transformational tools we possess as human beings. Too often Christianity, and accompanying beliefs surrounding the ultimate spiritual goal of the transcendence of the body, prevents true embodiment. And yet remarks such as “Listen to your heart,” or “What does your gut tell you?” are commonly heard in our culture, indicative of a baseline awareness that our bodies tell us stories about our reality.

When examining bottom-up and sideways approaches to healing, though scientific, it is evident that many of these approaches are rooted in spiritual or religious backgrounds. Though the West took a “scientific” and psychological top-down approach to healing, many cultures have utilized healing through bottom-up and sideways approaches that are embedded in their spiritual practice. Van der Kolk writes, “Mainstream Western psychiatric and psychological healing traditions have paid scant attention to self-management. In contrast to the Western reliance on drugs and verbal therapies, other traditions from around the world rely on mindfulness, movements, rhythms, and action.” (152) Though science recently began to explain how and why practices such as mindfulness or yoga have a deep impact on a person’s wiring and body systems, the irony is that these practices have been in place and healing people through self-management for thousands of years.

Through the study of these healing approaches, I recognized an aspect of healing not exclusively named but prevalent in the undertones. I chose to call this facet of healing “embodied interspirituality.” According to Daugherty, “The science of embodiment studies the physiological manifestation of an expressed or experienced life view.” (153) Embodied spirituality, something Daugherty details in *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness*, engages how we are physiologically impacted—and thus transformed and changed—by “engaging in different types of life views and/or spiritual practices.” (154) According to Grim and Tucker, “Spirituality involves a search for the sacred in which humans

experience their authentic being in relation to a larger world.” (155) This sacred search falls in line with personal self-growth and trauma healing—a desire to see one’s self within and outside the shadows—that can originate through embodied practices.

Neuroscience and therapeutic modalities offer profound healing opportunities, yet many people also require, desire or experience a spiritual component to their healing journey. Interspirituality, coined by the monk Wayne Teasdale, author of *The Mystic Heart*, “refers to a spirituality so deeply rooted in the heart and the heart-experience of oneness—so deeply rooted in ‘felt-sense’—that any creed, belief, background, history, indeed anything that could cause separation between beings, becomes secondary if not irrelevant.” (156)

Interspirituality offers a newfound recognition of “the interdependence of all domains of life and reality.” (157) While spirituality is an individuals’ search for the Divine or absolute—a journey of finding and becoming one’s Self—interspirituality allows one to look and discover this Self in a wide variety of practices, experiences, and beliefs. Not dependent on a guru or leader, this search can be a coming of age story all unto itself.

Often this spiritual sense involves a direct experience with a Divine presence, but it can also be an experience of a vast awareness or even complete emptiness. Interspirituality is not focused on the texts of traditions as much as it is interested in the actual spiritual experience of the practitioners of those traditions, and how the practitioners can share their experience with others outside of the traditions. Interspirituality provides a more open space to learn with others on a practical plane as opposed to just studying experiences or texts. One who discovers an interspiritual path is not “less than” one who follows a particular tradition. Interspirituality can become a way of life, an intentional practice, much like any religion is a practice—a constant cultivation of spiritual practice and dedication to the understanding of one’s inner transformation and their broader connection to the world.

In the book *Ecology and Religion*, Grim and Tucker explain that “The

spiritual journey situates the human in a larger context so that the small self is seen in relation to the great self.” (158) Often experiencing trauma or abuse leads to a self-centered focus, mostly out of the need to survive. As detailed in this paper, we fracture parts of ourselves as the fear drive takes over. Spirituality offers an avenue to see beyond oneself, and understand how our story of sexuality fits into the metanarrative of humanity’s story. It also allows us to connect with others, repairing the calm and connection drive, finding love where pain previously existed.

Spiritual healing can come within one’s own tradition. For example, Christians who have experienced sexual violence or shaming can find the healing power of Jesus and the Holy Spirit to help them navigate their trauma, abuse and pain. And yet, the dogma and indoctrinated beliefs of Christianity can cause a great deal of pain. Such persons can find solace and deep healing by seeking traditions that differ from their upbringing. Sometimes when the trauma has been so intense—such as sexual abuse caused by a pastor or priest—it is better for someone to experience “God” or the “Divine” separated from the dogma of their previous religion.

Many spiritual and religious traditions offer embodied spiritual practices (i.e. physical movement, yoga, breathing, meditation, dance, drumming, martial arts, qi gong, etc.) for healing. For a Christian who disconnected herself from her body, learning these embodied practices offer grounding and centering where she can feel a connection to the Earth through her body and lived experience. For centuries, these types of embodied practices were shared throughout lineages. Sometimes they were secretly practiced, such as in the case of Tantra and Kundalini Yoga. At other times, only the royalty and concubines could follow the tradition as in the Taoist jade egg practices relating to female sexuality. The practices were created or birthed from a place of desiring healing and wholeness for humanity in a personal and intimate way that inevitably impacted the collective community at large.

Another important component of interspirituality is that it creates healing through community. Religion is the lens in which one sees the

world. A person growing up within a particular tradition will understand the world through the lens of that tradition. When a person experiences trauma—whether it is physical abuse, or more psychological such as from an omnipotent tyrant God, or more moralistic in that their body is shameful—that religious and/or cultural lens and community accompanies the person’s trauma. That lens also moralizes the trauma within that tradition and community, making it difficult for a person to find healing within that framework. Traditions outside of the one in which she experienced the spiritual trauma can reveal a world view not apparent in the home tradition that in turn offers healing inside the container of a loving and supporting community. When one has experienced spiritual trauma from a community, it becomes difficult to trust and reach out to new communities. Therefore, finding support is an imperative aspect of deep transformative healing.

Finding one’s spiritual roots and home creates a new world-view lens. I met Ama McKinley at the Sex Down South conference in Atlanta where she led a workshop on her paper titled *Oshun Did It: Ancient Africa’s Sex-Positive Spirituality*. (159) Ama narrated her story of how the Christian church influenced her to be ashamed of her body and sexuality. Becoming sexually active in college, she experienced fractures with Christianity because she was being told sex was wrong, which created shame, and yet that belief didn’t fit her own experience or worldview. McKinley’s spiritual practice within Christianity no longer “felt sincere,” yet all she knew of spirituality was Christianity. She therefore went on a search for the Divine Feminine, discovering representations of her in indigenous traditions and Hinduism. She began “seeing feminine figures who were sexual and goddesses,” such as Ishtar/Astarte.

Introduced to Ifa and Orisha cultures—indigenous African practices that survived the Atlantic slave trade, in which practitioners live at harmony with themselves and nature, personifying nature itself—McKinley discovered a spirituality that supported sex positivity. Themes of sexuality found within this spiritual line of thought involved “polyamory, power via sexual essence, feminine defiance and equality, women as goddesses and equal to masculine energies, and the womb as

place of origin and ‘reservoir of existence.’” Through these discoveries, she found integration and transformation to achieve healing of her own sexuality and self-understanding. This is one example of how learning, studying, practicing, and participating in spiritual practices other than what we were raised with can bring great comfort—as well as psychological, emotional, physiological, and mental healing.

I find it is difficult to separate top-down, bottom-up, and sideways healing approaches from embodied spirituality, as this form of spirituality includes all avenues of healing through an array of avenues.

Levine writes, “the same immense energies that create the symptoms of trauma, when properly engaged and mobilized, can transform the trauma and propel us into new heights of healing, mastery, and even wisdom.” (160) Within the context of healing sexual and spiritual trauma, embracing and utilizing sexual practices that co-exist within a spiritual tradition can provide deep and cathartic healing.

And finally, you will bridge the experience of the first emotions with pleasure, to interconnect the two. This creates a neuronal network in your brain, which transforms the negative emotions from being barriers and blockages to your sexual experience to becoming gate openers to your sexual wholeness. And yet, one does not need to be spiritual or believe in a god or divine presence to heal spiritual and sexual trauma. For example, it can be very healing for an ex-Christian to participate in Vipassana meditation, a Buddhist practice that does not require or insinuate a belief in God. Interspirituality’s greatest contribution is the ability to view one’s self through a new lens while experiencing a range of opportunities and practices for healing and connection, whether through community sharing, embodied activity, dance, theater, art, or sitting in silence.



.....

IN  
CONCLUSION

.....

You made it to the end! But that certainly doesn't mean it's the end of your sexual exploration. Hopefully it means this is the beginning of your journey, a discovery of something deeper, more erotic and spiritually connected within yourself.

I imagine this book created a stir within you. Maybe you feel super affirmed in your sexual experiences and spiritual trauma, or perhaps you feel very resistant to the information shared within these pages. Wherever you're at, I'm grateful to you for being here and listening to the call to download this book and see what it was all about.

Like I said in the beginning pages, you can choose what works for you and leave the rest. My desire is not to convert you, demonize your faith or get you to see something "differently." My biggest desire is to offer you an opportunity to explore your inner-world and understand why and how you approach your sexuality the way you do, and to offer hope that if you want to change your relationship to your sexuality, it is 100% possible.

I hope you walk away from reading this knowing and believing that sex is a spiritual gift, orgasm can be a spiritual awakening and our sexuality is to be celebrated and deeply explored. Sex is a sacred union not only with other people, but with something bigger than ourselves. As articulated in this book, Christianity and religion has not always been sex negative. However, when the church felt threatened by women's bodies, based on poorly interpreted scripture, the suppression of sexuality took root and eventually evolved into modern day purity culture in which abstinence and heterosexual marriage are exclusively identified as sexuality, while human health, anatomy, pleasure, and education are neglected.

We no longer need to live into that paradigm though. We can explore viable options for healing that celebrate and allow us to reclaim our original sexual essence! Levine eloquently states, "Trauma resolved is a great gift, returning us to the natural world of ebb and flow, harmony, love, and compassion. ... I believe that we humans have the innate capacity to heal not only ourselves, but our world, from the debilitating



effects of trauma.” (161)

All the healing options related in this book can be accessed through sheer intention. When you have the desire to heal and actively works toward creating new neurological patterning, a deeply spiritual process often unfolds. As Daugherty explains, “When we heartfully engage in its profoundest sense, our bodily systems form a coherence where, working as an integrated whole, our mind, body and spirit become one and it feels like we become one with the universe.” (162)

The fascinating and amazing aspect of humans is that not all people are the same. Therefore, the meditations, contemplative practices, somatic exercises and spiritual paths that heals one person’s sexuality may work differently for you. Those searching for healing will more deeply resonant with specific paths and practices.

Now that you’ve read this book, tap into your intuition and heart, and follow the practices and offerings in this book that draw you in. I recommend writing down the top three things that hold you back sexually. Examine these blocks. Where are the coming from? What’s the root of the issue? Then look at what practice in these pages feel most in-line with what it is you’re going through. Commit to that somatic practice for 7 days and I guarantee you’ll see a transformation.

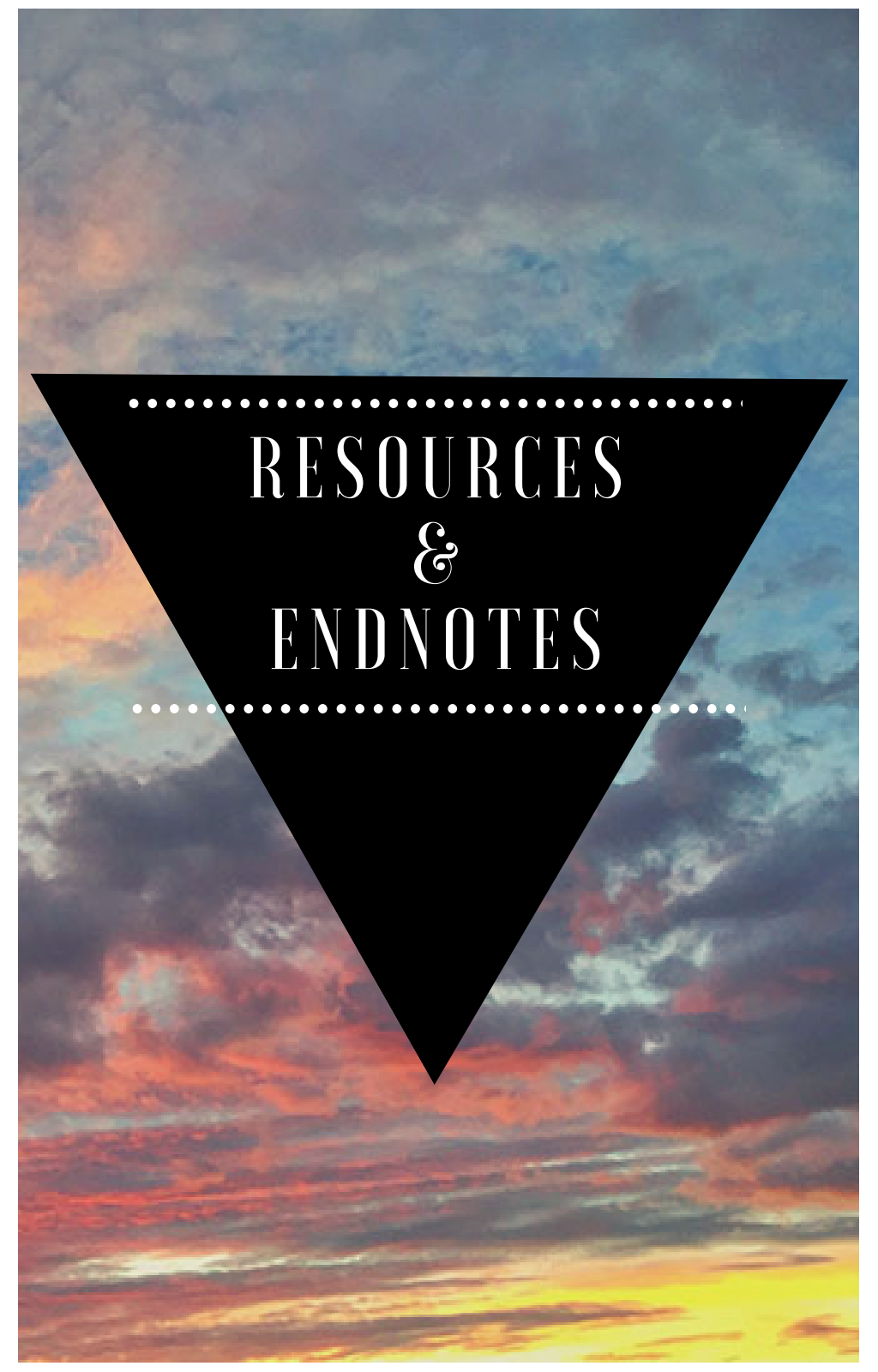
The practices mentioned in this book are only a meager and limited sampling of the wide range of possibilities available for sexual healing. The one’s I selected here to share with you offer healing for many people, yet there needs to be a desire to heal when utilizing the practices and an acceptance that certain ones may feel triggering.

If you need extra guidance or support in your process, please reach out to me as I am a certified coach with trauma healing experience, and I don’t want anyone to feel like they’re walking this journey alone. As in all healing processes, the most important aspect for transformation is to offer yourself a safe and loving container: to cultivate an inner acceptance, patience, compassion and self-love that allows healing at an optimal level.

I want you to walk away knowing your sexuality is not stagnant—it's a verb and never-ending journey. There is no destination, no ultimate orgasm, but rather opportunities to become more in touch and embodied within yourself, finding deeper truths and understandings about who you are and how you relate to this world.

A supremely divine aspect of our sexuality is that there are always deeper layers to shed, more beautiful places to discover, and more ecstasy and deeper pleasure to be found.

Once we embark on the sexual healing journey—finding ourselves empowered as opposed to the being the victim—doors open to a reality in which we can truly thrive.



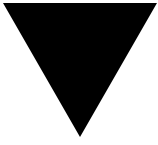
RESOURCES  
&  
ENDNOTES



## RESOURCES

Stay connected with those who take a step reclaiming their Sacred, Sexy and Whole selves!

- If you're a female identifying person, join my PRIVATE Facebook group Sacred, Sexy & Whole where there's a deep and intimate community of like-minded souls finding healing in our sacred and sexy selves!  
(Copy and paste the link below, or just click on this box and it will take you to the page)  
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/sacredsexywhole/>
- If the material of this book made you come alive and you want to experience the healing powers and intense transformation of 1-on-1 coaching, apply for my 10-session Sacred Sexual Awakening Program  
<https://goo.gl/forms/Ig6vDBMvrOzTOSYJ3>
- Watch my weekly educational & vulnerably personal vlogs on YouTube! <https://www.youtube.com/user/raehalder>
- Follow along my personal healing journey on Instagram: @thesacredandthesexy
- Join my public Facebook page for articles, meditations and insights: [www.facebook.com/thesacredandthesexy](http://www.facebook.com/thesacredandthesexy)



# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- 1) Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993), 47.
- (2) Naomi Wolf, *Vagina: A New Biography* (New York, NY: Ecco, 2012), 127.
- (3) Ibid.
- (4) Ibid, 128.
- (5) For examples see Bible verses John 6:53; Phil 3:2; 1 John 4:2.
- (6) Wolf, 131.
- (7) Ruether, 59.
- (8) Tertullian quoted in Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon, 1973), 44.
- (9) Amanda Barbee, "Naked and Ashamed: Women and Evangelical Purity Culture," *The Other Journal: An Intersection of Theology and Culture*, The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology, published March 3, 2014, accessed November 3, 2016, <http://theotherjournal.com/2014/03/03/naked-and-ashamed-women-and-evangelical-purity-culture/>.
- (10) David Schnarch, *Constructing the Sexual Crucible* (New York, NY: WW Norton & Co., 1991), 548.
- (11) Paul S. Fiddes, "The Status of Woman in the Thought of Karl Barth," in *After Eve*, edited by Janet Martin Soskice, Collins Marshall Pickering: 1990, Wijngaards Institute For Catholic Research, accessed December 5, 2016, <http://www.womenpriests.org/theology/fiddes.asp>.
- (12) Dianna E. Anderson, *Damaged Goods: New Perspectives on Christian Purity* (New York, NY: Jericho Books, 2015), 19.
- (13) Ibid.
- (14) Barbee.
- (15) Joshua Harris, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye: A New Attitude Toward Romance and Relationships* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1997).
- (16) "What Is Purity Culture?" *No Shame Movement: A Platform to Share Stories of Unlearning Purity Culture*, accessed November 13, 2016, <http://noshamemovement.com/purityculture>.
- (17) Ibid.
- (18) Ibid.
- (19) Anderson, 24.
- (20) Harris, 25.
- (21) Shannon Ethridge, *Every Young Woman's Battle* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2004), 25.
- (22) Ruth Graham, "I Kissed Dating Goodbye author is maybe kind of sorry," *Slate*, published August 23, 2016, accessed December 14, 2016, [http://www.slate.com/articles/life/faithbased/2016/08/i\\_kissed\\_dating\\_goodbye\\_author\\_is\\_maybe\\_kind\\_of\\_sorry.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/faithbased/2016/08/i_kissed_dating_goodbye_author_is_maybe_kind_of_sorry.html).
- (23) Anderson, 22.
- (24) Ibid.
- (25) Ibid.
- (26) Major Scott Nicloy, "Spiritual Abuse," *Micronesian Seminar*, last modified February 2006, accessed November 3, 2016, <http://www.micsem.org/pubs/counselor/frames/spiritabuse.htm>.
- (27) "Spiritual Abuse," *The National Association for Christian Recovery*, accessed November 3, 2016, <http://www.nacr.org/abuse/spiritual-abuse>.
- (28) Sue Park-Hur, "Breaking Cycles of Violence: Building Resilience in Individuals and Communities Experiencing Trauma," (Workshop, Disciples Seminary Foundation, Claremont, CA, November 11, 2016).
- (29) Peter Levine, *An Unspoken Voice: How the Body Releases Trauma and Restores Goodness* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2010), 45.
- (30) Emily Nagoski, *Come as You Are: The Surprising New Science that Will Transform Your Sex Life* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 120.
- (31) Edward Kruk, "Discerning and Transforming Spiritual Trauma: A Harm Reduction-Based Approach to Social (Justice) Work," *Proceedings, Discerning the Spirit: Re-Imagined Social Work: The Fourth Annual Canadian Conference on Spirituality and Social Work* (London, ON May, 2005), accessed November 15, 2016, <http://www.stu.ca/~spirituality/Kruk05.pdf>.
- (32) Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015), 1.
- (33) Lauren Wolfe, "Q&A: Gloria Steinem on ending rape in war," *Women Under Siege Project*, February 7, 2012, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org/blog/entry/qa-gloria-steinem-on-rape-in-war-and-what-we-need-to-do-to-stop-it>.

- (34) "Statistics About Sexual Violence," National Sexual Violence Resource Center, published 2015, accessed January 4, 2017, [http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications\\_nsvrc\\_factsheet\\_media-packet\\_statistics-about-sexual-violence\\_0.pdf](http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media-packet_statistics-about-sexual-violence_0.pdf).
- (35) Madison Park, "WHO: 1 in 3 women experience physical or sexual violence," CNN, modified June 20, 2013, accessed January 4, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2013/06/20/health/global-violence-women/>.
- (36) Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1997), 30.
- (37) Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975), 14-15.
- (38) Tina Schermer Sellers "About," Tina Schermer Sellers—Crafting Lives & Relationships That Thrive in Today's World, accessed October 26, 2016, <http://tinaschermersellers.com/mystory/>.
- (39) Barbee.
- (40) Tina Schermer Sellers, "Christians Caught Between the Sheets—How 'Abstinence Only' Ideology Hurts Us," *The Other Journal: An Intersection of Theology and Culture*, The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology, published April 6, 2006, accessed November 8, 2016, [http://theotherjournal.com/2006/04/02/christians-caught-between-the-sheets-how-abstinence-only-ideology-hurts-us/#\\_ftn9](http://theotherjournal.com/2006/04/02/christians-caught-between-the-sheets-how-abstinence-only-ideology-hurts-us/#_ftn9).
- (41) *Ibid.*
- (42) Brene Brown, "The Power of Vulnerability," TED video, 20:20, filmed June 2010, published December 2010, accessed November 18, 2016, [http://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_on\\_vulnerability.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability.html).
- (43) Brene Brown, "Listening to Shame," TED transcript, 14:24, published March 2012, accessed November 18, 2016, [https://www.ted.com/talks/brene\\_brown\\_listening\\_to\\_shame/transcript?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/brene_brown_listening_to_shame/transcript?language=en).
- (44) Tina Schermer Sellers, "How the Purity Movement Causes Symptoms of Sexual Abuse," published March 24, 2015, accessed October 26, 2016, <http://tinaschermersellers.com/2015/03/24/how-the-purity-movement-causes-symptoms-of-sexual-abuse/>.
- (45) Schnarch, 318.
- (46) Anderson, 133.
- (47) *Ibid.*, 187.
- (48) Alane Daugherty, "Embodied Spirituality: Psycho-Physiology of Contemporary Practice" Class Lecture, Claremont School of Theology, September 28, 2016.
- (49) Alane Daugherty, *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness: A Journey of Transformation through the Science of Embodiment* (Bloomington, IN: Balboa Press, 2014), 3.
- (50) *Ibid.*, 3.
- (51) *Ibid.*, 6.
- (52) *Ibid.*, 14.
- (53) Alane Daugherty, "Embodied Spirituality: Psycho-Physiology of Contemporary Practice" Class Lecture, Claremont School of Theology, September 14, 2016.
- (54) Daugherty, *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness*, 4.
- (55) *Ibid.*
- (56) Daugherty, Class Lecture, September 14, 2016.
- (57) Van der Kolk, 30.
- (58) *Ibid.*, 30-31.
- (59) Daugherty, *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness*, 5.
- (60) *Ibid.*, 54.
- (61) Van der Kolk, 131.
- (62) *Ibid.*
- (63) Daugherty, *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness*, 54.
- (64) *Ibid.*
- (65) *Ibid.*, 49.
- (66) *Ibid.*, 53.
- (67) *Ibid.*, 46.
- (68) Joseph LeDoux, *Synaptic Self: How our Brains Become Who We Are* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2002).
- (69) Daugherty, *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness*, 48.
- (70) Van der Kolk, 53.
- (71) *Ibid.*
- (72) Alane Daugherty, "Embodied Spirituality: Psycho-Physiology of Contemporary Practice" Class Lecture, Claremont School of Theology, October 8, 2016.
- (73) Daugherty, *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness*, 11.
- (74) *Ibid.*, 40.
- (75) Alane Daugherty, *Embodied Spirituality: Where are we, where we're going*, "Embodied Spirituality: Psycho-Physiology of Contemporary Practice" handout, Claremont School of Theology, November 30, 2016, 3.
- (76) Daugherty, *From Mindfulness to Heartfulness*, 41.
- (77) *Ibid.*

- (78) Ibid.
- (79) Nagoski, 123.
- (80) Ibid, 121.
- (81) Ibid.
- (82) Van der Kolk, 3. Kolk also includes “taking medicines that shut down inappropriate alarm reactions, or by utilizing other technologies that change the way the brain organizes information” in his analysis—as well as why these methods aren't complete or overall helpful forms of therapy for releasing trauma—but for the sake of this paper we will focus on the three methods mentioned above. Also see Nagoski, 128.
- (83) Van der Kolk, 3.
- (84) Van der Kolk, 3.
- (85) Nagoski, 129.
- (86) Alane Daugherty, *Embodied Spirituality: Where are we, where we're going*, 2.
- (87) Ibid.
- (88) Nagoski, 128.
- (89) Van der Kolk, 45.
- (90) Ibid.
- (91) Nagoski, 124-129.
- (92) Ibid, 128.
- (93) Layla Martin, “Transformation Essentials: Neuroscience and Sexuality” (live lecture from Sex, Love, Relationship Coaching Program Early-Bird Lecture, The Tantric Institute of Integrated Sexuality, December 9, 2016), <https://laylamartin.com/tantric-institute/>.
- (94) Peter Levine, *An Unspoken Voice*, 45.
- (95) Ibid, 112.
- (96) Ibid.
- (97) Nagoski, 128.
- (98) Ibid.
- (99) Sensorimotor Psychotherapy Institute, <https://www.sensorimotorpsychotherapy.org/articles.html>.
- (100) Somatic Experiencing Trauma Institute, <https://traumahealing.org/>.
- (101) TRE For All: Tension, Stress, Trauma Release, <http://traumaprevention.com/>.
- (102) Nagoski, 129.
- (103) Van der Kolk, 332-348.
- (104) Ibid.
- (105) Ibid, 98.
- (106) Ibid, 218.
- (107) Ibid.
- (108) Kimberly Nichols, “The Radical Healing Power Of Somatic Sexual Wholeness Therapy,” *The Establishment*, December 5, 2016, accessed December 10, 2016, <http://www.theestablishment.co/2016/12/05/the-radical-healing-power-of-sexual-somatic-wholeness-therapy/>.
- (109) Ibid.
- (110) Ibid.
- (111) Van der Kolk, 218.
- (112) Nichols.
- (113) Ibid.
- (114) Van der Kolk, 219.
- (115) Peter Levine, *Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma: The Innate Capacity to Transform Overwhelming Experiences* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 1997), 17.
- (116) Ibid, 18.
- (117) Ibid, 20
- (118) Ibid.
- (119) See Minke de Vos, *Tao Tantric Arts for Women: Cultivating Sexual Energy, Love, and Spirit* or Mantak Chia, *Healing Love through the Tao: Cultivating Female Sexual Energy* for hundreds of examples of somatic sexual practices.
- (120) Minke de Vos, *Tao Tantric Arts for Women: Cultivating Sexual Energy, Love, and Spirit* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 2016), 19.
- (121) Layla Martin, “Throne of the Heart,” *The Tantric Institute of Integrated Sexuality*, Quarter 1 Module 6, <https://laylamartin.com/programs/slrc/>.
- (122) Vos, 180.
- (123) Ibid, 155.
- (124) Ibid, 180.
- (125) Ibid, 296.
- (126) Ibid, 346.

- (127) Daugherty, *Mindfulness to Heartfulness*, 145.
- (128) *Ibid.*
- (129) Kristine Thomason, "Sorry, Gwyneth: Experts advise against jade egg to strengthen pelvic muscles," CNN, published January 27, 2017, accessed February 19, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/27/health/jade-egg-vagina-partner/>.
- (130) Layla Martin, "Why the mass media shamed a woman's sexual experience just to attack Gwyneth Paltrow," Medium, published February 2, 2017, accessed February 3, 2017, <https://medium.com/@laylamartin/why-the-mass-media-shamed-a-womans-sexual-experience-just-to-attack-gwyneth-paltrow-32d91cb90b26#.tyx9nxqg8>.
- (131) Vos, 208.
- (132) *Ibid.*, 208-209.
- (133) *Ibid.*, 208.
- (134) Layla Martin, *Sexual Wholeness*, Week 5, Jade Pleasure Jade Egg Course, <https://laylamartin.com/programs/jade-pleasure>.
- (135) Van der Kolk, 218.
- (136) B. Alan Wallace, *Mind in the Balance: Meditation in Science, Buddhism, and Christianity*, (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2009), 30.
- (137) Van der Kolk, 210.
- (138) Wallace, 33.
- (139) *Ibid.* (140) Nagoski, 130.
- (141) Richard C. Schwartz, *Introduction to the Internal Family Systems Model* (Oak Park, Ill.: Trailheads, 2001).
- (142) "What is Focusing?" Focusing Resources Inc., accessed May 2016, <http://focusingresources.com/getting-started/>
- (143) *Ibid.*, 16.
- (144) Wallace, 28.
- (145) Daugherty, *Embodied Spirituality: Where are we, where we're going*, 8.
- (146) *Ibid.*
- (147) *Ibid.*, 6.
- (148) Van der Kolk, 209.
- (149) Layla Martin, "Heart Breath," Heart Awakening and Love Practice Overview, The Tantric Institute of Integrated Sexuality, Quarter 1 Module 1, <https://laylamartin.com/programs/slrc/>.
- (150) Daugherty, *Embodied Spirituality: Where are we, where we're going*, 3.
- (151) *Ibid.*
- (152) Van der Kolk, 209.
- (153) Daugherty, *Embodied Spirituality: Where are we, where we're going*, 1.
- (154) *Ibid.*
- (155) John Grim and Mary Evelyn Tucker, *Religion and Ecology* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2014), 29-30.
- (156) Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato: New World Library, 1999), 26.
- (157) *Ibid.*, 4.
- (158) Grim & Tucker, 30.
- (159) Ama McKinley, "Oshun Did It: Ancient Africa's Sex-Positive Spirituality" (presentation at Sex Down South conference, Atlanta, GA, October 12-14, 2016).
- (160) Levine, *Waking the Tiger*, 21.
- (161) *Ibid.*
- (162) Alane Daugherty, *Mindfulness to Heartfulness*,