Singleness and sexuality

Pauline Steinmann

"We are fired into life by a madness that comes from our incompleteness. We awake to life tense, aching, erotic, full of sex and restlessness. This dis-ease is, singularly, the most important force within existence. It is the force for love and we are fundamentally shaped by our loves and deformed by their distortions."[1] With these words Ronald Rolheiser affirms what Augustine wrote long ago: "You have made us for yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." This desire for connection with God and other human beings is the foundation of our sexuality. Sexuality is the drive in us toward connection, community, family, friendship, affection, love, creativity, and generativity. Our sexual energy gives us life; it pushes and pulls us into the passions of our lives. Yet as both Augustine and Rolheiser attest, we will always remain incomplete until we find our complete rest in and with God. As human beings we have been created in love and for love. How we express this love conveys who we are as sexual beings, made in God's image.

Our love will never be fully consummated until we are one with God. The loneliness of an unconsummated love should drive us to deeper relationship with God, out of which we offer our affections, passions, and love to the world.

The totality of our lives shapes our sexual expression, beginning with our childhood homes. I grew up in a household of daughters. On the farm we helped with all chores: in the house, the barn, and in the fields. Because we were all sisters, we shared the bathroom and the bed. I remember the security of lying alongside my sisters, feeling the warmth of human bodies snuggled under heavy blankets. Growing up as the second oldest of five children gave me opportunities to develop my sexuality as a nurturer. When I was six years old, I loved to take my baby sister for walks in the stroller or baby buggy. That mothering instinct

came alive again in my teen years as I helped care for a little brother. I have enjoyed being part of the lives of my nieces and nephews, and I delight in the loving friendships we have developed over the years. All these events and memories have shaped me as a sexual person.

Strong intimate friendships have always been part of my life. As a child I cherished the good friendships of cousins; we were best friends. I treasured the youth group at my church because we were all friends—boys and girls. Early in my teen years I learned that intimate friendships can be forged with males and females apart from romantic or physical or genital relationships. I was a big girl, much taller than my older sister and towering over the guys in my high school class. Although my size sometimes made me uncomfortable, I found ways of channeling my body energy positively by using my height and size to play volleyball and basketball on the school teams. It has taken a conscious effort to understand and embrace my sexuality and body image in ways that are not limited to physicality.

I define sexuality broadly. It includes the body and body image; relationships with people of both genders; the need for connection; spirituality; the ways we express who we are whether male or female, athlete, artist, or nurturer. Sexuality involves how we respond to beauty in the world. Beauty gives me joy—whether it is the beauty of a visual display that represents a theological concept in worship, the sound of waves lapping against a shoreline, wheat sheaves waving in the wind, the ocean throwing up a storm that crashes against rock, a simple yellow gerbera daisy gracing my dining room table and bringing life into my home, or my cat lazily curled on her favourite chair and purring her contentment.

Sexuality includes the depth of friendships forged over months and years; it includes levels of intimacy explored, pursued, and sometimes denied or rejected. It includes emotional intimacy, the secrets shared with a few people who know us well and whom we know well, a sense of safety within that unconditional love. Our sexuality is expressed through our intellect, through discussions and debates inspired by common interests or disparate experiences. It is expressed through our choice of life work, and in the compassion and hospitality we offer others. It includes our bodies:

our need for touch, for skin against skin, for heartbeat against heartbeat, for hugs and kisses, for sitting side by side enjoying the warmth of another's body close to ours.

Although we know our sexuality includes all of who we are, even in the church we are guilty of confusing sexuality with genital sex. To some extent we have bought the idea that unless one has experiences of sexual intercourse, one is not a whole person. We say we don't believe the messages on billboards, in magazines, and on television, promising that we will find happiness and completeness when we give in to our sexual urges; yet these images seep into our consciousness. Sadly, the church too has sometimes perpetuated the idea that the greatest and most meaningful expression of our sexuality is made via our genitals. Too often we equate being single or celibate with being asexual. Living as a sexual and celibate person in a world that glorifies sex is a challenge.

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Mennonite tradition offers us little concept of celibacy as a choice. We do not have religious vocations as do Catholics and some other Protestant denominations.[2] When a person decides to remain single and celibate, we do not mark that choice with vows publicly professed. Although the *Minister's Manual* does provide a "Blessing of a Life of Celibacy," this blessing practice is little known or used in the Mennonite church.[3] We make assumptions in the church that adults who are single are single by circumstance. They are the "leftovers," unstable, shy, or gay or lesbian. While our *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* notes that the single life is a fully acceptable way to serve God,[4] and our scriptures cast in a positive light the choice to remain single,[5] nevertheless the spoken and unspoken message to single adults is that to be single and celibate is neither acceptable nor good. Innocent questions—"Why aren't you married yet?"—can be hurtful and insensitive. People find it hard to understand that someone may actually choose to be single and celibate.

Why would one choose to be celibate for God? Are singleness and celibacy a choice or the product of circumstances? Without a

theology that articulates an understanding and embrace of celibacy, and without practices that embody such a theology, we will find it difficult to answer these questions. Is it always one or the other? Does a circumstance become a choice after a time? I believe the decision to be celibate is a deliberate choice. The decision to be single may not always be a choice. No doubt there are many people who would not have chosen to be single, but circumstances have determined it. Some may never have found a mate; others are single again through widowhood or separation or divorce. But to be celibate, one has to choose it. Many people in our society choose to be single yet choose not to be celibate. As a follower of Jesus Christ and single, I choose to live a celibate life. If sometime in the future I meet someone with whom I choose to share my life in marriage, my decision to be celibate would change.

The Mennonite church has not provided a structure or space for celibate people to reflect together on their sexuality. At times I have been envious of my Catholic brothers and sisters who live in intentional communities within which they are encouraged to explore their sexuality as celibate persons. In the past couple of years, several nuns and priests have become my good friends. These committed women and men of God have graciously listened as I inquired into their formation as single celibate persons within their Catholic tradition. The dearth of Mennonite writing in this area has led me to seek out other resources. Writers such as Henri Nouwen, Ronald Rolheiser, Barbara Fiand, Sandra Schneiders, Kathleen Norris, Keith Clark, and Donald Goergen articulate well the demands and joys of living a celibate life.

Living celibately does not preclude having intimacy in one's life. Our sexual drives are given to us as an impetus toward establishing and maintaining intimate relationships with others. Celibate people are as sexual as other people, because the need for intimacy is a universal human trait. Celibate people don't fulfill that need with genital sexual activity, but the intimacy we experience is no less complete and natural. As Keith Clark suggests, if we who are celibate don't attend to our need for intimacy and if we repress our biological urges and drives, we will become time bombs waiting to explode. If we ignore our need for intimacy, if we don't establish strong intimate friendships, then we

are more likely to act out our need genitally and romantically.[6] All people are sexual, and we must all find ways to meet our intimacy needs.

Martha was one of the people who met my need for intimacy. Over a period of twenty years, we nurtured our friendship and she shared her family with me. Two years ago, my dear friend passed away. Although we always lived in different parts of the country, we enjoyed weekly phone conversations and spent a few days together every couple of years. Those times were precious to us, deepening our trust in each other as we created safe places of vulnerability. We walked the beach deep in conversation, and we drank champagne and ate bread, our own eucharistic celebration, giving thanks for our deep friendship.

Martha would wrap me in a warm embrace when I needed to be held. We enjoyed the sun, the ocean, the conversation, the silence. We did not hide our concerns from each other, but neither did we intrude into each other's private thoughts and feelings. Without being genital, this friendship was deep and intimate: it was affectionate, with hugs, kisses, and physical closeness. We revealed our deepest thoughts to each other, and laughed and had fun together.

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My friendship with Martha was a clear expression of the way God creates us to be in relationship. As churches we create communities of faith where we worship together, engage in mission together, challenge and support one another. We are good at caring for one another and responding to one another's needs. Yet providing community for those who don't fit the norm—people with disabilities, single parents, single adults, gays or lesbians—is often more difficult. I yearn for the day when the Mennonite church is the adoptive family God has called us to be. Without my biological family in the church I attend, I need my adopted faith community to be present to me.

In spite of this adoptive faith family I am part of, I have found that a strong, supportive community is not a given. I must create it for myself. Each time I have moved from one province to another, developing this community has become an important

part of my relocation strategy. I have nurtured friendships with parents and children, single and married adults, men and women. As a single woman, I am grateful for the male friendships I have been blessed with. Respecting others' boundaries and maintaining my own boundaries helps me develop strong, intimate, platonic friendships with men. I have been blessed with many friends from the church I grew up in, colleagues I have worked with, friends from seminary days, and priest friends. I am grateful to God for all these friendships, because they have taught me how to hold friends close without being possessive. After the moment of connection, we will carry on with life independently.

Being celibate means I am free to love unpossessively. Because no one relationship demands most of my attention, I can invest my energies in developing a variety of intimate friendships. I have been gifted with a steadfast spiritual friendship with a dear friend for the past twelve years. No matter where I live, this friendship takes me through thick and thin. This woman is part of my community wherever I am. Relationships with men and women, with adults and children, with single people and married people, all enrich my life.

Being celibate gives me greater need and perhaps greater opportunity to nurture my relationship with God. I am free to use my time as I wish: to take a spiritual retreat, to spend an hour walking, meditating, or journaling. Because I have no one to come home to at the end of the day, my ongoing companion in life is God. It is this relationship that sustains me over the long haul. Henri Nouwen talked about being empty for God, open and free for God's presence and for God's service. The yearning I feel for intimacy can ultimately only be filled by God.

We are made in God's image, yet our maleness and our femaleness remain a mystery to us. How we are like God—how our bodies and our spirits, our emotions and our souls, our spirit and God's spirit are connected—remains a sacred mystery because we have been created and blessed by God. Likewise celibacy is a mystery. My choice to be celibate means that I use my sexual energies creatively in ways other than for genital intimacy and procreation. Rolheiser writes that "in its maturity, sexuality is about giving oneself over to community, friendship, family, service, creativity, humor, delight, and martyrdom so that, with

God, we can help bring life into the world."[7] Our sexuality and hence our celibacy are lived out in practical ways that benefit the world. Kathleen Norris notes the radical quality of celibacy. "Celibacy, simply put, is a form of ministry—not an achievement one can put on a resume but a subtle form of service to others." When one's sexuality is dedicated to God through Jesus Christ, the goal becomes to make oneself available to others, body and soul.[8] As celibate people, we do not repress our feelings but rather offer all our affections to God through prayer. God transforms our affections into service for the world.

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I enjoy sharing the gift of hospitality in my home. My second bedroom offers a resting place to sojourners in the city. As a celibate woman, I enjoy this ministry of compassion for and connection with others. The prophet Micah reminds us, "He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic. 6:8). Hospitality is one way to fulfill the desire to connect with people with which God has blessed me. It is a way of channeling my affections for people and the world as I strive to live out the justice and kindness that God calls me to.

No matter whether we are single or married, our souls remain restless until we find our complete rest in God. Our love will never be fully consummated until we are one with God. Rolheiser says that life will always feel somewhat like an unfinished symphony. The loneliness we feel from an unconsummated love should drive us to deeper relationship with God, out of which we offer our affections, passions, and love to the world. "We must incarnate our sexuality into the world in such a way that it constantly shows that love and the heart are the central realities of life and the kingdom."[9] When we realize that our energies for creativity, compassion, love, respect, and commitment all have their source in God, we can be instrumental in bringing contentment and happiness to ourselves and to the world.

Notes

[1] Ronald Rolheiser, *Forgotten among the Lilies: Learning to Love beyond Our Fears* (New York: Doubleday, 2005), 3.
[2] Here I use the term *religious* to refer to those who take vows as members of religious orders.
[3] John Rempel, ed., *Minister's Manual* (Winnipeg, MB, and Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1998), 129.
[4] *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective*, article 19 (Waterloo, ON, and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1995), 72.
[5] Matt. 19:10–12; 1 Cor. 7:25–38.
[6] Keith Clark, *Being Sexual . . . and Celibate* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1986), 128.
[7] Ronald Rolheiser, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 198.
[8] Kathleen Norris, *The Cloister Walk* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1996), 121.
[9] Ronald Rolheiser, *Forgotten among the Lilies*, 77.

About the author

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