

On the Pain of Eros



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The sexual models the erotic is true for both the pleasure of Eros and its pain. We have talked much about how sex models Eros in all of her faces, including pleasure. Now we turn to the pain of Eros. Here, too, the sexual models the erotic.

Sexuality leaves so many mortally wounded in her wake. There is so much pain from what is supposed to be the source of so much pleasure. We are confused about sexuality. And that confusion is the source of much of our distress, as Persian poet Hafiz attests below in his poem “A Barroom View of Love.”

FIRST THOUGHTS ON THE PAIN OF EROS

Love is grabbing hold of the Great Lion's mane

And wrestling and rolling deep into Existence

While the Beloved gets rough

And begins to maul you alive.

There was a time when we all believed that there was a way out of the pain of Eros. Some people may believe that we didn't try hard enough; others are correct in asserting that we didn't succeed. But we can tell you that we believed, in theory, in a version of love that is fulfilled through commitment, loving gestures, and good listening skills. We thought that the dilemmas that love presents to us were solvable if we were earnest enough, practiced enough, and learned how to honestly communicate the truth of who we are and what we could offer. Unfortunately, there was a quiet untruth in this approach—not only because all of us have lied to others, but also because most of us have lied to ourselves, saying that if we got it right, we would not have to feel pain in loving.

Our approach didn't take into account the ruthless side of Eros—the aspect of Eros that does not let us cut this kind of a deal in any way, which is wildly uncompromising and insists that we live a fully embodied life, one that includes pain, loss, confusion, and bewilderment. Eros is fierce and unrelenting; it won't be captured, cajoled, or lulled into the realm of the comfortable, particularly when it is the ego trying to settle into an untrue version of love. As the Hafiz puts it:

*True Love, my dear,
Is putting an ironclad grip upon*

*The soft, swollen balls
Of a Divine Rogue Elephant
And*

Not having the good fortune to Die!

In the Zen school, there is a famous koan about a master whose teaching is to give a student a thorough beating, and no matter what the student's question is, the beating comes just the same. When the student attempts to answer the question, he receives a beating. When the student remains silent, she gets a beating. When the student attempts to escape or withdraw, a beating comes anyway. Eros often gives us a beating; a complete knocked-down, foot-to-groin, nose-smashed-against-asphalt pummeling. It demands that we experience pain, injury, and ego death, and it presents suffering itself as one of its many (hard to believe) loving touches.

The sexual models the erotic—this is true in all kinds of positive and pleasurable ways, but it is also true in terms of suffering and pain. The sexual life is filled with an array of agonies that are not easily borne by the ego, by the body, or by the identity of a small or limited self. There is the pain of not being seen or desired, and the pain of being seen starkly, in clear light of our most obvious flaws and

imperfections. There is the pain of not having the attention we seek, or the pain of having it for a time, and then losing it. There is the startling pain of realizing that we are not special in the way we thought we were. Or worse, recognizing that when we thought our love was exclusive, that we are not the only one. There is the pain of others wanting more from us than we are able to give, and the pain of trying to give and not being wanted. There is the pain of love that turns to hate, of affection that turns to contempt, and of physical exchange, once desired, that becomes repellent. Then there is the overlarge, unbearable pain of betrayal. Betrayal is uniquely excruciating because only someone whom you really love—“someone who would never betray you”—can deliver this particular sad and often vicious blow.

We sometimes are called to enter so deeply into the interiority of the pain of sexual and erotic betrayal that we can no longer believe anything about anything. At these moments, sometimes moments that last in aching reality for months and even years, it hurts so much that we cannot find any ideas around it. The only thing we are able to do is to let ourselves into the feeling, to live on the inside of the pain until it clears. Too often we begrudge pain. But pain will not be begrudged. Do not imagine, the pain says to us, that it should be different than this. Do not let yourself have a lot of ideas of how it should be. Surrender to it. Become it, settle in a deeply humbling way to the energy of how it feels to be hurt.

Sex models life in that it hurts like hell. Eros is radical aliveness moving toward contact. Radical aliveness has a side that is excruciatingly painful. So does contact. Is it any wonder that a vigorous world of sex and pain are coupled in the common practice of S&M, and domination and submission are the two poles around which this practice revolves? We are bound—bound to inflict injury, and bound to receive it. We’re sure to be hurt in love, and we’re sure to hurt. We are subjected to injury against our will, and no matter how hard we fight against it, we injure others all the time. We say this not to release ourselves or others of responsibility; ignorance, hubris, and grasping demand reckoning in love, and all transgressions against others must be recognized for what they are. But genuine sensitivity, radical responsibility taking, even the vow to end suffering, do not take away pain.

The beautiful rock mystic Bono and the transcendent Mary J. Blige sing from the pain of the Irish and the black American experience:

Did I ask too much, more than a lot

You gave me nothing, now it's all I got.

We're one, but we're not the same,

Well, we hurt each other, then we do it again . . .

It is enough to make you want a drink of good Irish whiskey, but medicating the pain is a short-lived response. We have to be willing to look into pain first, deeply, directly. We need to know it firsthand, entering the interior of pain like we enter the interior of sex—with full presence, with a yearning to see, feel, and know it, and with a mind and heart expanded enough to embrace the whole impossibility at once. For as we saw, presence, wholeness, interiority, and yearning are the primary faces of the erotic modeled in the sexual, both in her pleasure and in her hurt.

How does the hurt feel? What are her qualities? How do we engage her interiority without violating our wholeness, failing to be fully present to what actually is happening inside of us and losing the yearning that once animated our hearts? What is the pain telling us? If we could hear her speak, what sacred secret wisdom might she whisper in our ear? We become the strange lover of pain, and through this, Eros manifests in full display.

And like a lover, we need to attend to our reaction to pain with the same care, and the same discrimination with which we seek our pleasure. Neither pain nor rage can ever justify murder. And murder comes in many disguises.

What is our response to the feelings? What strategies arise to protect us against the experience of pain? Do we withdraw, attack, dull out, or immediately seek another love source like an addict who is dope sick?

What exactly is going on here? Only a lover longs to look directly into the eyes of reality and see things exactly as they are. When we talk about spiritual courage—this is the moment. When we talk about being a lover—this is what we mean. We embrace everything exactly as it is—in excruciating, gorgeous detail. We notice how we hide, slink away, or build up a solid story of breach and betrayal. And our spiritual training again instructs us to surrender instead, to let go, to relinquish our ideas, and to breathe into the unwanted sensations. It promises to help us transcend devastating erotic experience, but in love, the only way out is through. We cannot transcend painful experiences without going through them, without becoming them.

Hafiz says, “Love is the funeral pyre / where the heart must lay / its body.” Easier said than done. Thankfully, some things are just bigger than we are. Sex compels us beyond ordinary boundaries of self. So, too, Eros in the guise of pain overcomes ego. When the hurt is large, all separation bets are off. When there’s no keeping pain at bay, when it hurts so much that explanations and stories won’t hold, when emotional escape isn’t possible, the dharma gate blows open and realization of all and everything at once pervades. There is no time, no past, and no future. There is no other way than this one, no hurt and no hurting. There is no transgression, mine or yours, and all, even murder, is miraculously forgiven in the truth of complete surrender. Let yourself feel that and breathe another step in the surrender. In the surrender of pain is a radical kind of commonality, even of union and at-one-ness, because everyone shares in the pain. We all hurt. We have that in common and in that dawning consciousness of our interconnectedness is the beginning of some form of realization.

In that realization we begin to feel the embrace of the Shechinah of Eros. She is the most expansive, compassionate, and full universal lover, holding every aspect of us at the deepest core of our being, rocking us, listening to our sobs, even as she caresses our head. The Shechinah holds us all in our pain, and in it, we meet her there. In the comfort of her arms, with the soothing sounds of her voice, pain is none other than compassion herself. “In all of their pain, I am in pain . . .” cries out the erotic mystic Isaiah. “Your left hand is under my head and your right hand embraces me,” is ecstatically exclaimed by Solomon, who experiences more than most, the pain of the erotic and the sexual.

There is a deep core in our experience that knows how to hold others in their pain. But we do not do it nearly often enough. That deep knowing that is our birthright is what the Zohar of the Hebrew mystics call the “Shechinah that is I.” That knowing is God. It is the same as going into the pleasure so extremely, surrendering and opening to it so you become it. And in that merging with the full openness to love and pain—because it is you—you feel the luminous nothingness of all that is.

Let us say it again. There was a time when we believed that there was a way out of the pain of Eros. Some people may believe that we didn’t try hard enough; others are correct in ascertaining that we didn’t succeed. But we can tell you that we believe in a version of love which is fulfilled through commitment and which includes betrayal, loving gestures which disappoint, and through listening skills yearning to hear everything even as we are sometimes deaf to those who love us most. We, all of us, must be willing now to feel hurt, and the deepest hurt is the recognition of having hurt others. Rumi said it best in “Huddled Beneath the Sky”:

*The sadness I have caused any face
by letting a stray word
strike it,*

*any pain
I have caused you,
what can I do to make us even—*

Demand a hundred fold of me—I'll pay it.

We sometimes are called to enter so deeply into the interiority of the pain of sexual and erotic betrayal that we can no longer believe anything about anything. At these moments, sometimes moments which last in aching reality for months and even years, it hurts so much that we cannot find any ideas around it. The only thing we are able to do is to let ourselves into the feeling, to live on the inside of the pain until it clears. Too often we begrudge pain. But pain will not be begrudged. Do not imagine, the pain says to us, that it should be different than this. Do not let yourself have a lot of ideas of how it should be. Surrender to it. Become it, settle in a deeply humbling way to the energy of how it feels to be hurt. Let yourself feel that and breathe another step in the surrender. In the surrender of pain is a radical kind of commonality, even of union and at-one-ness, because everyone shares in the pain. We all hurt. We have that in common and in that dawning consciousness of our interconnectedness is the beginning of some form of realization.

In that realization we begin to feel the caress of the Shechinah of Eros. "Your left hand is under my head and your right hand embraces me," cries out Solomon, who experiences more than most, the pain of the erotic and the sexual. There is a deep core in our experience which knows how to hold others in their pain. But we do not do it nearly often enough. That deep knowing that is our birthright is what the Zohar of the Hebrew mystics call the "Shechinah that is I." That knowing is God. It is the same as going into the pleasure so extremely, surrendering and opening to it so you become it. And in that merging with the full openness to love which is your pleasure—it is you—you feel the luminous nothingness of what it all is. This is true as well if you surrender to pain properly.

Most people do not know how to make love because they do not know how to expand and open. Most also do not know how to make love in pain because they do not know how expand into their contraction.

Whenever you truly collapse into the pain, when you surrender into the hurt, whether yours or of others, what always happens is that you feel the embrace of the feminine. The pain, if you're truly to enter its inside, always gives way to the Shechinah's embrace. If you are willing to feel so deeply into the pain that you no longer exist, then you meet God in pain. No being should ever die without feel like he is being held by the lover, by the feminine, by the Shechinah.

This is called by the erotic mystics of the Kabbalah, to participate with pain of the Shechinah in exile. We meet the Shechinah in our pain. "In all of their pain I am in pain," cries out the Hebrew mystic Isaiah. This is the "Shechinah that is called I." When you recognize that she is you and you carry that quality into the world, you bring redemption to yourself, the world, and the Shechinah. You bring the redemption that always was and already is. To enter the pain in this way, you must, at least for a time, give up the protest. Give up your ideas about what and how people should act and what people should do. That is the teaching of forgiveness. That is the teaching of love.

It is Bono who knows to sing of the pain of Eros:

one love, one life, when it's

one need in the night.

Whenever there is need there is pain. Because there is no one person who can ever fill our emptiness, the pain of unmet needs always accompanies the erotic encounter with other.

Did I disappoint you

or leave a bad taste in your mouth?

The illusion that separate selves can meet and find ultimate oneness is shattered in the realization of separation. Knowing that we are “not the same” must always come before the tenderness of true love that has the capacity to stay open through the pain.

We're one, but we're not the same.

We get to carry each other,

carry each other

Bono, in verse after verse, evokes the impossibility of loving, which must always be recognized before love's true possibility is born.

Have you come here for forgiveness,

Have you come to raise the dead,

Have you come here to play Jesus

to the lepers in your head

He returns again and again to the poignant realization of separation which must always precede true bliss.

We're one, but we're not the same.

Well, we hurt each other, then we do it again.

It is more than mere pain, however. We often feel degraded and humiliated in love. Being willing to bear the ego's humiliation is a pre-requisite for great love.

You ask me to enter,

but then you make me crawl

To receive another in love is to be willing to bear the ecstasy of their pain.

And I can't keep holding on to what

you got, when all you got is hurt.

Once you realize that there is no escaping the pain of Eros, you can then settle in to the fierce grace of commitment.

One life, but we're not the same.

We get to carry each other,

carry each other.

From a cognitive perspective, how we relate to this pain born of what we experience as erotic and sexual betrayal is a decision. Neither pain nor rage can ever be a license to commit murder. And

murder knows many disguises. To avoid the translation of pain into violence, whether physical or verbal, we need to pay close and unflinching attention to our interiority.

What thoughts arise regarding the pain, what beliefs and ideas do we hold about this moment? Are we against this moment? Are we faulting someone for it? Are we certain that our view of how the world should be is right and correct? Can we identify a feeling of separation, of being alone, of being cut off and isolated from the rest of reality in that moment? Most likely we can, and very subtly, yet profoundly, we can watch how the mechanism of ego works. And we should notice correctly that when we feel cut off, separate, diminished, or abandoned, there is usually a subtle attempt to secure our version of how we would like the world to be.

Sometimes simply seeing the ego at work, relaxing the struggle, and opening to the truth of the moment liberates our awareness. Sometimes the holding is deeper in the emotional and physical body. The yogic traditions ask us to free pain through the body by breathing into the fullness of sensation, and to feel the love in the pain itself, to feel aliveness in actual feelings in the body. A feminist yogini friend of ours once said, “Because you say ‘ow’ instead of ‘ah’—because the sensation appears as a menace instead of a friend—doesn’t mean that it’s not from the same source.”

All phenomena arise from this one source, and the body is none other than God. All of our spiritual traditions, in however many different forms, show us that everything is one thing . . . one beautiful, radical, unknowable and ungraspable, vast, empty gorgeousness . . . and that nothing, absolutely nothing, needs to be rejected. This is the enlightenment born of pain. In the universality of pain is the democratization of enlightenment. It is an enlightenment we all must share, for its knowing can end the pain.

The pain of the sexual is, however, an intense and exacting model for how we engage pain in every facet of being. For the sexual models the erotic. It is in the sexual, whether her pain or her pleasure, that all the sacred secrets are held. It is only in opening ourselves to her wisdom that we can resist the temptation to turn secrets sacred into secrets sordid.

Love is a wound that never heals. We can hold on forever to the wound or be willing to enter and feel the pain now and then open up again in love. The Shechinah is always holding us, even and especially when it hurts so much. But love never stops, especially when we are in pain.

Keep your heart open even as you feel sucked into the vortex of love’s wound and can imagine no way out. You can get lost in the pain, but deep down you know it is a lie. For love has already found you. To see your death and betrayal and not stop being a lover—that is the terrible, awesome, and wondrous vow of the Bodhisattva. When we swear to do that, we find our place in the source and remind the source itself of its true nature, which is love. When we take the Bodhisattva’s vow, we need not persuade ourselves or others that the legitimate privacy of intimacy was a strange and terrible oath of silence that never was. We need not distort silence of presence and claim it as silence of absence. We need not claim voice that was never taken from us. For our oath to speak the word of love amid the pain will always soften the hurt and restore our courage.

If we learn to live wide open, even as we are hurt by love, then the Divine wakes up to its own true nature of love. To be firm in your knowing of love even when you are desperate, to be strong in your knowing of forgiveness even when you betray and are betrayed, this is what it means to be holy. Sufi mystic Rabia said it beautifully in “It Acts Like Love”:

*My body is covered with wounds
this world made,
but I still long to kiss Him, even when God said,*

*“Could you also kiss the hand that
caused each scar,
for you will not find me until
you do.”*