

What is Sex For? Interview with Wendell Berry

Modern Reformation: Political writers on the right and the left have tried to claim you as one of their own. This is no less true on the topic of sex since you criticize Christians for offering a simplistic approach to sexual restraint while you also point out the flimsiness of arguments for sexual liberation. What is your attitude to Christianity and how much has religion contributed to your understanding of sex and the body?

Wendell Berry: I suppose my attitude toward Christianity would have to be described as divided. The Bible, especially the Gospels, has always been important to me. Some parts of it were planted firmly in my mind when I was a child. It remains close to my thoughts and I read it fairly regularly. I am not always a confident or convinced Bible reader, but to myself I seem to be pretty much a Scripture-oriented person.

On the other hand, I feel uncomfortably at odds with some Christian organizations because of their estrangement from the natural world and economic life, their spiritual-physical dualism; and because I have strong misgivings about evangelism.

My understanding of sex and the body owes very little to what I have heard in churches, but it has been profoundly affected and shaped by my reading of the Bible. The biblical idea that astounds and consoles and frightens me every time I think of it (which is often) is the proposition that sanctity is inherent in all created things; every life lives by sharing in God's spirit and breathing his breath; everything we have is a divine gift.

MR: What frightens and consoles you about the sanctity that is inherent in all created things? Do you have any thoughts about why our society appears to have lost this sense of fear and consolation inherent in creation?

WB: What consoles me in the thought of the sanctity inherent in all created things is that if we accept that this is so, then we humans are relieved of the burden (and the inevitable errors) of making meaning and assigning value. We are thus returned to our original task of caretaking-attending to or, as the Buddhists say, "saving" the creatures. This is particularly frightening now, when caretaking is in eclipse and we all are participating in a destruction-based economy.

MR: What is the greatest weakness in the Christian church's response to the so-called sexual revolution?

WB: I'm not able to speak with any authority about the Christian church's response.

I think the "sexual revolution" came about partly in response to a religious absurdity: the belief that sex is attractive to us because we are evil. The rejection of that absurdity (on which no sound sexual discipline could have been established), plus the idea that we are merely "higher animals," plus the availability of "birth control" technology gave us the "sexual revolution," which is based on another absurdity: the belief that sex is just a sort of all-natural handshake, a good way for strangers to get acquainted.

Between these two absurdities, I think, it is possible to construct an idea of Christian sexuality that corrects them both.

Sex is a divine gift ("without him was not any thing made that was made"). When you have received a divine gift, you must be glad, you must be grateful, and you must make a return of proper care or carefulness. Sex, like food or drink or shelter or any other need or delight of bodily life, confronts us with the practical duties of stewardship. What must we do to protect the beauty, the pleasure, and the sanctity of these good things?

MR: To mention the "practical duties of stewardship" involved in sex is to take something pleasurable and involve it with work. So is part of the reason for our impoverished view of sex that we have an impoverished view of work, that is, that anything involving toil cannot be pleasurable?

WB: Yes. To say that our participation in sexuality ought to involve us in the work of marriage making, family making, homemaking, etc., does not detract from sexual pleasure and it implies no necessary insult to the work. Do we assume that we get to the pleasure of eating only after the hardship of farming or gardening and cooking and before the hardship of cleaning up the kitchen? If so, why eat? The popular idea that we must dread and drudge and sacrifice for the sake only of a few widely scattered moments of pleasure is an argument in favor of suicide.

MR: In your fiction you are restrained in your depiction of sex compared to authors such as John Updike. Maybe no one can compare with Updike, but do you have definite ideas about what kind of sexual explicitness is appropriate in good literature?

WB: I think I made a pretty adequate study of literary sex scenes, starting with *God's Little Acre* in the late 1940s and continuing approximately to *Couples*. But finally, without losing interest in sex, I lost interest in sex scenes. Once a couple gets into bed, they don't do anything unusual. Sex scenes are no more astonishing than food scenes. There is probably an inevitable dullness and absurdity in sex scenes involving other people. They ought to be written as comedy if they are to be written at all.

I think, too, that there are degrees and kinds of intimacy that cannot be represented in art. To represent directly a couple making love, if they are to be taken seriously as lovers, seems to me as presumptuous and disrespectful and false as to represent directly a person praying alone.

Finally, it is a fact that sexual love making itself is not dramatic. The climax, you might say, is altogether too predictable. There is no more drama in sex than there is in eating a sandwich. The drama is in the story that brings a couple together. All of *The Odyssey*, to use the greatest example, gathers toward the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope in their marriage bed. The thought of that night has moved the imagination of half the world for two or three thousand years, and yet Homer tells us nothing more explicit than this: "So they came / into that bed so steadfast, loved of old, / opening glad arms to one another" (Robert Fitzgerald translation). This is so powerful, so sexually powerful, precisely because of its discretion. To have gone on to tell what the lovers did, in the manner of a modern sex scene, would have reduced those lines to about five percent of their power.

MR: Have you thought much about chastity as a subject for fiction? Is it any more dramatic than sex?

WB: I am not much of an expert on chastity. For a long time I didn't get the point. But the young John Milton wrote a wonderful poem, a mask, entitled *Comus*, which deals with "the sage and serious doctrine of Virginitie." It is a poem about the proper use of nature's gifts, about temperance. In thinking about that poem, I finally got the point I had missed before. The point about temperance, including sexual discipline, is not that it reduces pleasure, but that it safeguards abundance. To be "riotous" with nature's abundance is to use it up. The question is in what circumstances does this abundance give the most, and the most lasting, pleasure.

Comus is hardly a cliffhanger-but, yes, what one does in confronting the temptation to be riotous with nature's abundance is authentically a story, and is more dramatic than storyless sex.

MR: In your most recently published novel, *Jayber Crow*, the main character considers himself to be married even though he has no sexual relations. Does this mean that you think it possible to have marriage without sex or are the two essential to each other?

WB: *Jayber Crow* makes his "marriage," without the bride's knowledge or consent, because he has reached the crisis of his life and faith. He is in love with a married woman whose husband, to whom she is faithful, is unfaithful to her. Jayber cannot bear to think that by the terms of this world she could not have had a faithful husband. But he can prove otherwise only by becoming himself her "faithful husband." For him, the only possibility of life is in this faith. I think this says something about marriage, but I don't think it says anything about the possibility of sexless marriage.

MR: So faithfulness is part of the stewardship necessary for sex? If so, is this why marriage is the fitting context for sex?

WB: It does seem to me that faithfulness is part of the necessary stewardship. By faithfulness, I suppose, is meant the complete and permanent commitment that the marriage vows call for. Marriage asks us to recognize that we have entered into a sharing of life and fate with another person, and it asks us to keep trying to give ourselves into that utter mutuality.

But it is easy to be bigoted or silly on this subject. I am talking about marriage only as I best know it. Other people in other places and cultures will know other ways. What our culture seems to me to be saying to us, in countless stories and songs, is this: sexuality is a divine gift. Like other such gifts, it is a dangerous power, dangerous to ourselves and to others. To limit the danger, we try to contain the power within the form of marriage. But marriage itself is dangerous, involving fearful risks and great effort. When it works, it works well, allowing the pleasure of sexual love to ramify in the pleasures of home life and family life. But it doesn't always work. Sometimes it fails. It takes more than a church wedding to make a marriage, and (as folk wisdom has it) "more than four bare legs in a bed."

MR: In *The Unsettling of America*, you ground your discussion of sex and marriage in a more fundamental point about the interconnectedness of body and soul, body and other bodies, and the body and the earth. Since you are a farmer and a thoughtful defender of farming communities, could you spell out the relationships you see between human reproduction and the fertility of the land?

WB: Sex is not a story in itself. It has interest, meaning, even power, only when it is understood as part of a story. To divide sex from fertility is to divide it from its story and make it an end in itself. That is what lust and pornography do: they make sex an end in itself. And the corporate "conservatives" concur in this project-as witness their advertisements and many of their products.

But sexual love, to achieve its full goodness and beauty and power, needs the amplitude of a story. It joins husband and wife together, joins them to their fertility, to their children and grandchildren; for its sake the couple makes a home, a household, an economy, which joins them to the fertility of the world, to the generosity of God. Sexual love can do this, or it can fail to do this, but its success or failure is a story.

MR: Another important consideration in your writing about sex is the way in which current economic arrangements have affected our understanding of marriage, the relations between husbands and wives, and the connections between families and communities. Could you explain why the economic health of local communities is essential to a deeper understanding of sex and its function in marriage?

WB: Sexual love is the power that joins a couple together. To ratify and honor that power, we make marriage. Marriage is the way we protect the possibility that sexual love can become a story, joining many things together. It is strange and sad that in our age of the world we have learned so to devalue this great connective power that we can disconnect it from everything and make it an end in itself.

When love sees itself becoming a story, it naturally calls for good work: the work of homemaking, place making, life making, neighborhood making, community making. It calls for good houses, good furniture, good food, good clothing, good teaching, and so on. When love is its motive, work strives to be good.

But when we remove love from fertility, from its story, we place it in a whole series of divorces: of love from work, of utility from beauty, of work from pleasure, of money from economy, of economy from nature, and so on. Love is seen as a reason to buy something, not as a reason to work lovingly or to make things well.

I probably should add that I'm not implying an opposition to birth control. I do object to abortion as a method of birth control, but various means of limiting population have been recognized as necessary for a long time, and I think they are necessary now. In objecting to sex as an end in itself, I am objecting to "carefree sex." I think sexuality and sexual love require-and repay-care.

MR: If you think that sex should not be divided from fertility, does this mean that you also think sex is primarily for procreation, since part of the story making of procreation is to add another member to the story of the household and the neighborhood?

WB: I'm tempted to say that sex is primarily for pleasure and procreation merely a by-product. That is often the way it is understood, and often the way it appears to be. But I really think that to divide sex from any of its attributes is wrong. The idea that sex is only or primarily for procreation seems to me to be a part of the utilitarianism that has so uglified and displeased the world

It seems to me that we have an obligation to take a legitimate or undestructive pleasure in all the world's pleasurable things, and that the pleasure does have a kind of primacy: If we took no pleasure in them, why should we be troubled to take care of them or use them well?

MR: One last question. Sex appears to be one of the more intimate aspects of marriage. Is that a fair statement, or is our attitude to sexual intimacy the product of an overly low view of the body? In other words, do you have any thoughts about the function of intimacy in marriage and how sex contributes to intimacy?

WB: Intimacy has the sense of "inmost," as in inmost knowledge. So there can be such a thing as unintimate sex. Sex is certainly an intimate part of marriage, but surely it is no more intimate than all the rest that is implied by "living together." The best possibility of marriage is that intimacy and love might exist together, that a person can be known with inmost knowledge by another person and yet be loved. When older people recommend marriage to the young, they are wishing for them that their loneliness might find an answer in this intimate love. There are no guarantees; this is just the best we can do.

- From Modern Reformation; SEX IN THE CHRISTIAN LIFE Nov./Dec. Vol. 10 No. 6 2001 Pages 38-41.