

SACRED DESIRE

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Growing in Compassionate Living

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To all the Sisters of Charity
for whom the love of Jesus urges them
to bring their redemptive attuning into the world
most especially,
Sister Linda Chavez, SC
Sister Mary Aloys Powell, SCL
Sister Rose Therese Wich, SC

—Nancy K. Morrison

To my sons
Andrew Lawrence Severino
Michael John Severino
and grandsons
Travis Connelly Severino
Sundance Connelly Severino
Kai Connelly Severino
Joseph Lawrence Severino
whose love heals

—Sally K. Severino

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The century that is ending has been preoccupied with nucleic acids and proteins. The next one will concentrate on memory and desire. Will it be able to answer the questions they pose?

—François Jacob, *Of Flies, Mice and Men*

Foreword

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I received a letter from someone I'd never met, asking me to consider co-writing a book. Though I was busy with my own manuscript—too busy, I suspected, to even consider working on a joint project with people I didn't know—I was intrigued enough by the proposal outlined in the letter that I agreed to fly to New Mexico to meet the authors in person. Thus began an amazing three-day conversation with two longtime psychiatrists whose private and professional lives were “not one,” as Sally would put it, but also “not two.” Early on in our talks, I realized that their serious commitment to science and the practice of medicine was absolutely interfused by their equally deep commitment to the practice of silent prayer. And this fascinated me.

Our discussion began around Nancy's dining-room table in a book-lined, rambling Victorian near downtown Albuquerque, filled to capacity with healthy plants, happy dogs, and countless musical scores. We picked it up again in Sally's Taos-style home overlooking the great high desert valley, a space whose elegant simplicity reminded me of the guest house at Christ in the Desert Monastery. Here indeed were two interesting human beings, seemingly not much alike, who had nevertheless found their intellectual and creative endeavors much enhanced by collaboration.

As they described their work to me, painstakingly unpacking for this woefully uninformed lit major the neurological back-stories of emotional states like fear and love, I found myself thinking of Psalm 139: “For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made” (13–14). What they had come to realize

through years of clinical work and professional study, they told me, is that we humans truly *are* designed for loving and being loved. Even more amazingly, we are *neurologically* designed for communion with God. This was delightful news, particularly in an era that more often than not uses science to denigrate, rather than validate, the claims of religion.

As fascinating as I found their work, however, several things quickly became clear: first, these two were already so “resonantly attuned” as creative partners that a lay third party would simply be an intrusion and an impediment, and, second, they were far more spiritually adventurous than I. Their mentors included controversial pioneers like Matthew Fox and John Shelby Spong; mine were C. S. Lewis and Pope Benedict the XVI. They visualized a world in which all religions, including Christianity, were ultimately revealed as one; I was and still am utterly convinced of the uniqueness and superiority of orthodox Christianity over all other religions.

Yet two years after that marvelous brainstorming session in the desert, I am thankful indeed that they went ahead with this project on their own. For they have marvelous riches to share—riches that nonscientists would be hard-pressed to uncover without their gracious help, riches that I am convinced have very much to do with “the mystery hidden for long ages past” (Rom. 16:25). More, what they have to teach can enlighten and instruct *everyone*—regardless of his or her religious or metaphysical beliefs—who longs to be a better, more compassionate human being. In this sense, Sally Severino and Nancy Morrison are like spiritual midwives, coaxing us forth into the light of our better selves. And for this good work of theirs, I personally owe them a great debt of gratitude.

Paula Huston

Introduction

He [God/the Divine] alone is our desire and our life,
and nothing else can give us any joy.

—THOMAS MERTON

OUR TRAINING AS PSYCHIATRISTS has given us a valuable insight into the contemplative side of our being. Although we walked different paths, both led us to the same point of view. Both of us see sacred Desire as the force that urges us to fullness of life.

During most of my adult life, I (Sally) lived as two separate selves: my professional self as a psychiatrist and my private self as a person of faith. While each had its own integrity, I could never bring them together into oneness of being. Then in my late fifties, two events changed me forever.

On the professional level, mirror neurons were discovered. Mirror neurons are special cells that activate in our brains when we see another person do or feel something, just as they activate when we do or feel the same. This means that we are biologically equipped to relate on a very basic level by resonating with others' actions and emotions. This scientific discovery gave me one way to understand how we are able to read each other's minds and how we can grasp the intentions of others through direct simulation—by feeling, not by thinking. Because direct simulation occurs automatically and is not conscious, it gave me something physically

embedded in me but beyond my will—something I could rely on—to account for interrelatedness. Here was my biological link to others and to God.

Simultaneous with this discovery in my professional life, a friend handed me Thomas Keating's book *Open Mind, Open Heart*. Keating introduced me to contemplative prayer, "a process of interior transformation, a conversation initiated by God and leading, if we consent, to divine union."¹ Contemplative prayer is a Christian method of mindfulness practice that is similar to methods practiced by other traditions such as Buddhist meditation, Taoist tai-chi, and Hindu yoga.² During the daily practice of contemplative prayer, my way of seeing reality changed.³ This confirmed for me that not only did my mirror neurons allow me to respond to others by feeling them, my mirror neurons also allowed me to respond to the Divine Presence in and beyond all that exists.

My professional and faith selves integrated.

My (Nancy's) path, though different from Sally's, brought me to a similar place of professional and faith integration. The Roman Catholic Church wouldn't allow me to become a priest, and being a nun wasn't for me. I wasn't suited to scrubbing the bishop's house, especially when he was giving a party to which the nuns weren't invited. Instead, I turned to nature, which I loved, and became a scientist. The science that most excited me was the study of the mind, and so I specialized in psychiatry.

While my professional experience taught me about the ravages of terror in patients who suffered abuse, my personal living with breast cancer taught me about the distorting power of anxiety. Scientific studies confirmed what I felt and observed. They showed that people in a state of anxiety use their limbic/midbrain to process information. In doing so, people cannot think flexibly, and

their thinking becomes superstitious, colored by frightful imaginings. People in a state of terror use their brain-stem/autonomic nervous system to process information in ways that are reactionary, knee-jerk responses. These states, over time, become the traits that characterize us.

I wanted to help my patients overcome the wounds of abuse, and I wanted to prevent my own anxiety from becoming a permanent trait. As sometimes happens, a crisis provokes an inspiration. My cancer motivated me to pick up the telephone and call Sister Mary Aloys, the Catholic nun who had been my spiritual mentor since I was a teenager. She suggested that I try contemplative prayer. It turned my life around.

I have continued this prayer practice with Sister Linda and Sister Rose Therese. It has taught me that in the spiritual realm something could be “real,” such as my encounter with the Divine, and not be scientifically “measurable.” It was, however, behaviorally verifiable in the way I lived with and beyond cancer. No longer did I react solely from anxiety. I could also live calmly and respond to life’s throes with trust. I could help my patients do likewise.

The integration of our professional and faith selves opened both of us to sacred Desire. But what exactly is “Sacred Desire?”

The word “desire” most simply means: “to long or hope for.” We may long for a relationship or a fast new car. We may hope for peace in the world or a new, more satisfying job. But the Latin root of desire, *desiderare*, reveals a deeper meaning: *de* is translated as “from” [or down, away] and *sider*, *sidus* as “heavenly body.” Desire, then, literally “comes from the stars,” which in ancient times signified the celestial powers, or the Divine. We are referring to this deeper meaning in this book. To denote that, we spell Desire with a capital “D.” Our Desire in its purest form reflects our longing to

be one with the Divine—the life force that creates and animates all that is.

Our understanding of “sacred” comes from the twentieth-century iconoclast Ivan Illich, who links “*sacrum*, the Latin noun . . . to . . . *sacred*,” such that sacred is “the doorway to the absolute other, the place of self-revelation of the holy.”⁴ A synonym for *sacred* is *holy*. We use *sacred*, therefore, to mean the threshold at which our Desire meets the ultimate Holy (Yahweh in Jewish terms, God in Christian terms, Allah in Muslim terms, *Atman* in Hindu terms, Buddha nature in Buddhist terms).

Desire draws us to the threshold of the ultimate Holy, where we can respond to the spiritual and manifest it in compassion. This is sacred Desire, which we experience incarnated in us and mediated by our mirror neurons.

Sacred Desire: Growing in Compassionate Living springs from our shared conviction that Desire is the powerful urge that brings us into relationships that form our lives. This conviction shapes the chapters that follow. In chapter 1, we look at the biophysical and spiritual foundations of sacred Desire. In chapter 2, we see that newborn infants are born biologically equipped with the capacity to express their Desire and to interact with the Desire of their caregivers. When the newborn’s Desire is met with love, joy results and fuels Desire for more compassionate relational experiences.

Newborn infants are also biologically equipped for self-preservation and fight/flight or freeze behavior. When Desire is met with fear, the biology that fear triggers leads us into out-of-control behaviors such as addiction, lust, and gluttony. We focus on the growth of Desire developmentally (chapter 3) and socially (chapter 4), before exploring how Desire can be distorted (chapter 5) and reconfigured (chapters 6 and 7). We continue Desire’s journey into redemptive action within us—expressed psychologically as bringing us from distortedness to wholeness, biologically as bringing us from fight/flight or freeze to calm and connection, spiritually as bringing us

from brokenness to holiness (chapter 8)—and within community, expressed as bringing us from self-protective to species-protective behavior (chapter 9). We close in chapter 10 by exploring the implications of sacred Desire for the peaceful preservation and nurturance of our world community and our planet.

We invite you to embrace sacred Desire and to be willing to be surprised at what can result when we ask ourselves, “How do we live most fully from our sacred Desire for the Divine?”

SACRED DESIRE

WOMB OF COMPASSION

The Beginning of Life and Love

From all eternity God [the Divine] lies on a maternity bed giving birth. The essence of God [the Divine] is birthing.

— MEISTER ECKHART

THAT OUR LIFE BEGINS IN LOVE is beautifully conveyed in Hebrew, where the word for compassion or mercy, *rachamim*, comes from the same root as the word meaning womb, *rechem*.¹ The view of the Divine as “womb of compassion” captures the vast benevolence that underlies all of creation, including our own coming into being. It also exemplifies how all of life is relational—from the relationship between the Divine and nature, between the Divine and humans, between parent and child, and between body and mind and spirit as told herein.

As Jeannie B., speaking of her first pregnancy, put it, “I felt like the three of us—my husband, my baby, and I—were all caught up in the wonder of the Divine.” Like Jeannie, we are sometimes acutely aware (just as we are also sometimes utterly unaware) of this wonder, this manifestation of our relationship with the Divine that is expressed as love.

Often parents manifest this love in particularly strong and compelling ways, even before a child is born. Shortly after Peg S.

learned she was pregnant, someone asked her if she planned to keep the baby. “Of course, I’m going to keep the baby!” she cried, her response immediate and visceral like a power potion coursing through her body.² Looking back, Peg comments, “It was almost as if my own life was threatened.” Her body spontaneously readied her to protect the inviolable connectedness that she felt within her for her baby.

Peg’s love of and connection with the life growing inside her vitally illustrates the womb of compassion—what Jewish scholar Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg calls “the space of desire, the hollow of holiness.”³ In a very unexpected way, Peg’s love of the life in her space of desire led her to a deeper love of herself. “I felt precious to have this child within me,” she says. “It was an honor to carry this child.”

The womb itself is inherently compassionate. While we live in the womb, we are kept warm without clothing and nourished without eating. We don’t even need to breathe. All of our needs in utero are met without our effort.⁴

In addition to a baby growing, much happens during pregnancy. Biologically, Mother’s hormones are changing. Psychologically, Mother is imagining her baby and forming a mother mind-set. Spiritually, Mother is developing a spirit-set about being a mother and about her relationship with her baby. Socially, Father and extended family are offering the support that allows this psychobiospiritual experience to blossom.

One mother—quoted by infant researcher Daniel Stern and his psychiatrist wife, Nadia Bruschiweiler-Stern—gives us a glimpse of the mind-set and spirit-set she is developing. During her fourth month of gestation when she felt her baby kick, she said, “It’s as if this baby kicks in accordance with my moods, like he’s already tuned in to me.” According to the Sterns, “The imagined baby is, of course, purely subjective, so the same kick could inspire the mother to imagine any . . . possible character traits.”⁵