

Making Sex a Sacred Pleasure

An Interview with Riane Eisler by Jyotsna Sreenivasan for New Moon Network, March/April 1996



Photo by David Loye

What if sexuality were a sacred, celebrated part of our religion and culture? What if sexual love, nurturing, and women's life-giving powers were seen as the most important subjects of art and literature? What if children were taught these values along with their ABCs? That's the vision of Riane Eisler, author of the influential best-seller [*The Chalice and The Blade*](#).

In her new book, *Sacred Pleasure: Sex, Myth, and the Politics of the Body* (Harper and Row, 1995), Eisler argues that a world in which sexual love is sacred is also a world of peace, caring, and respect for others. Eisler challenges current Western notions of sexuality by revealing that prehistoric European egalitarian cultures actually revered sexuality and bodily pleasure as part of their religion. She contrasts this with many modern religious traditions, which revere war, martyrdom, and asceticism while denigrating sexuality and pleasure.

I interviewed Eisler to learn how she would have parents and teachers (in this day of sexually transmitted diseases, AIDS, and teen pregnancy) foster a responsible, healthy sexuality in our children.

Jyotsna Sreenivasan: I think many people would agree with you that sexuality is a wonderful part of life. But is it dangerous to tell children about the pleasures of sexuality? Will it lead them to have sex too early and be at risk for diseases and pregnancy?

Riane Eisler: To tell a child that sex is pleasurable is hardly news! Children become aware of the pleasure of masturbation very early. The notion that if we don't tell children about sex, they'll never find out is silly. Sexual images are all around us. The question is: How do we help children learn about sexuality not in the gutter, not from misogynist song lyrics? Parents and schools have a responsibility to teach kids a partnership model of sexuality -- a model in which one person is not dominant over the other, but where both are equal.

JS: How do you recommend that parents teach their children about sexuality?

RE: Sex education is often taught by parents in a cloud of fear, sin, and guilt -- because parents are afraid children will get into trouble. I recommend that parents teach children sexual responsibility to themselves and others, and not to feel ashamed of their bodies. Children should learn that their bodies are sacred and miraculous.

JS: Recently we've been hearing from some members of Congress that we need to bring shame and guilt back into sex education. What is your response?

RE: Bringing more shame into sex education is cruel, and it doesn't work. A few centuries ago, shame did not prevent people from having sex. It just led to a lot of infanticide, abandonment of children, and the death of children in orphanages. Thirty years ago shame and guilt led to illegal abortions. In addition, shame and guilt often totally deprived women of their capacity for sexual pleasure. That's criminal.

JS: How do we teach children the responsibility that goes along with sex?

RE: The crux is to teach children to value their bodies enough to decide what they want to do, and how they want to be treated. We can help children set goals that they can follow themselves. I prefer the term "self-regulation" to "self-discipline," because discipline implies punishment. "Regulation" means there are consequences associated with our actions, and that therefore we want to think about and plan our actions and our lives.

JS: If you had a chance to design a sex education curriculum for schools, what would it look like?

RE: Sexuality can't be isolated from the rest of our lives, and it can't be too clinical. I would start with a discussion of life goals, and I would combine sex education with parenting education, emotional literacy and nonviolent conflict resolution. Even first-graders can be taught these things, in small increments.

Parenting education is an effective way of helping children not have children. They can meet and play with a baby, and learn what it takes to care for a baby. From these experiences they learn that babies take a lot of work and that babies can't really give them the love they want.

JS: I found your discussion about human sexual evolution in Sacred Pleasure fascinating. Would you teach this in sex education classes?

RE: Yes. In Sacred Pleasure I show that our sexuality is one thing that makes us human. We don't have sex just to procreate, as most other animals do. We have the desire to have sex at any time, not just when a woman is fertile. We use sex as a "pleasure bond" between people. This pleasure bonding is one of our higher faculties that distinguishes us from most other animals. It's important for children to understand this.

JS: Say your 15 year-old daughter comes to you asking for birth control. You really do not want her to have sex so early. What should you do?

RE: it is unwise to tell a child, "No, you can't have contraception." When you tell an adolescent no, that's a challenge. The worst thing for a parent to do is to say, "Absolutely not." The child will want to do the thing they are forbidden to do. I suggest that parents be clear and open about their feelings, and their reasons. You can say, "I think you are too young for this, both physically and emotionally. There are many things for you to consider. But I want you to think about this yourself." Encourage her to talk it over with other people she trusts -- peers, teachers, or other adults. You might recommend some good books for her to read on the subject. You can ask that she make no decision at all for two weeks or a month, until she has given the subject serious thought, and has talked to others. Then offer to talk to her again. The main thing is to keep the lines of communication open.

JS: What about boys -- are there particular things we should teach our sons about sexuality?

RE: For both boys and girls, we need to explore how we can introduce more flexible gender roles. If boys start feeling that sex and pregnancy are their responsibilities too, they won't want to "score" by having sex with or impregnating as many girls as possible.

JS: How would you recommend talking to children about homosexuality?

RE: There is a lot of hate-mongering out there about homosexuality. So the first thing to say is that homosexuals are just people who have a different attraction sexually. You can tell children that gay people face many problems -- a great deal of discrimination and difficulty. Try to dispel some of the myths -- gay people do not attack people sexually any more than straight people. Also point out to children that just because boys hug each other, or girls hold hands, that doesn't mean you're gay, or that what you're doing is sexual. Everyone needs affection.

JS: As you mentioned, kids see unhealthy images of sexuality all around them. In some

advertisements, sex is linked to violence, or children are shown in sexual poses. How should parents deal with this?

RE: Parents need to take a strong stand about the ads. They can say, "I will boycott Calvin Klein because their ads demean sexuality and promote the exploitation of children." They can write letters to advertisers with offensive ads, and get the PTAs to write letters telling the advertisers they won't buy their products unless they change their policies. They can teach kids to look at media portrayals of sexuality and ask, "Is there something wrong here?"

JS: I think a lot of parents reading this may be nodding their heads in agreement with your views, but still may feel uncomfortable with talking to their children about sexual pleasure for fear their kids will engage in sexual experimentation.

RE: Sexual experimentation will happen whether parents talk about sex with their kids or not. The key is to give children a new ethic, a new morality, of sexuality. It isn't immoral to have sexual desires. It is highly immoral to pressure someone to have sex against their will. We must teach kids about sexual harassment, about unacceptable touches, about date rape, about sexual abuse. It is important for children to learn that there are boundaries, and that they don't have to please someone else by letting the other person touch them sexually. And we need to help them look at what they want in their lives in the longer term.

JS: It sounds like you recommend that parents teach children this new sexual morality, help them to set their own goals, then step back -- that parents should not try to control the child's sexuality.

RE: If we help children set goals they can follow themselves, if we can equip our children with a partnership morality, they will manage to make good decisions most of the time -- and that is the best we can hope for.

JS: What do you see in our future in terms of attitudes toward sexuality?

RE: Three hundred years ago there were hardly any democratic governments. And that seems strange to us. But today there are people who try to suppress open discussion of sexuality, just as the discussion of democracy was suppressed years ago. So the struggle to discuss sexuality, and to reclaim pleasure, is only the latest step in our struggle for a more equal world -- a world of partnership. And maybe three hundred years from now, it will seem just as strange that sexual violence, child sexual abuse, reproductive freedom, and freedom of sexual choice were not always seen as important political matters.

Jotsna Sreenivasan writes young adult novels, including THE MOON OVER CRETE (Holy Cow! Press, 1994), which was serialized in New Moon. She lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband Mark, and works for the Feminist Majority Foundation.