**Life Lesson**

**HARNESSING THE POWER OF SEXUALITY**

**TO PULL US FROM SICKNESS INTO WELLBEING**

 Sexual activity has a strong effect upon the brain, much like taking a drink of alcohol has. Both activities set off a cocktail of cerebral hormones that pleasure our bodies, loosen up our inhibitions, and flood us with a strong sense of wellbeing.

 These effects are widely known, but a fourth one is more important, and seldom talked about. *We develop a strong attraction to whoever and whatever we are experiencing alongside sex, and over time, we develop a strong bond with them.* It’s what the Bible calls “becoming one flesh,” and it happens automatically, subconsciously. Many doubt this is true, and few understand how this bonding occurs.

 The process of classical conditioning was discovered, named, and famously demonstrated by **Dr. Ivan Pavlov with his dogs**. When he rang a bell right before they were fed, they soon started salivating and getting excited at the sound of the bell, no matter when it rang. They came to desire and bond with the bell, a previously “neutral stimulus,” because it seemed to bring them all the wonders associated with the highlight of their day. We come to desire and bond with whoever we drink with. In the same way, and even moreso, **we come to desire and bond with whoever we have sex with.** We long to connect ourselves to whatever or whoever we believe to be the source of our sexual enjoyment.

 From adolescence on, whether we have known it or not, we have been responsible for choosing who and what we bond with sexually. When it comes to sex, we are all dogs. But we are all Dr. Pavlov too! **Our bodies are dogs, and our souls are their trainers.** Through classically conditioning ourselves, with virtually none of us being told about it, we have trained ourselves to desire and bond with whatever *people, mindsets, and situations* we have allowed to stimulate our sexual activity. Most of the popular choices for sexual stimulation today are unhealthy ones, as they bring people over time more sickness than wellness.

 For example, **our culture teaches us to separate sex from spirituality, and to experience sex more like animals do.** “Purely natural, spontaneous” sex allows only other *physical* instincts into awareness. When we shut everything else out of our sex life except our animal instincts, our sexual experience will include some sickening fruits of the flesh. These often include **deception, shame, fear, and of course lust -- bonding with and idolizing the object of our sexual desire.** This poisons our wellbeing by increasing our appetites for other sickening mindsets and lifestyles. For example, without believing that we can revise and redirect our desires, we come to believe that we can’t be satisfied without getting what we desire, as if we were animals.

 Has anybody ever taught us that we can all retrain ourselves to use our sexuality to help ourselves desire and bond with a loving creator, or with healthier fruits of the spirit? Yes, thirty centuries of religious teaching has taught this, validated by other wisdom streams from philosophy, science, and common sense. All these have taught us that things like **honesty, faith, humility, compassion, peacemaking, stewardship, enthusiasm, and physical fitness** are aspects of both sexual and personal integrity. Only when we have *personal integrity*, when we are independently comfortable in our own skin, can we experience *relational integrity,* with God *and* with a loved one.

 The four wisdom streams just mentioned have warned us not to waste our sexuality on recreational pleasures, or **escapes from responsibility, relationship, and reality**. Sadly, those experiences are more available to us in our youth than are romantic relationships with a healthy partner. By contrast, wisdom teaches us to save our sexuality for later, *using it to celebrate and consummate our loyalty and intimate companionship with a healthy life partner in marriage.* We will need all those magnetic and healing powers of our sexuality when we forge a life partnership with another person, in marriage. Way more than some private recreational pleasure, marriage does a great deal more good for more people in the long run, including current and future spouses and children. It encourages us not to regard the beloved as a *source* of all that is good, but rather as a *resource*, a channel who can merely share things they are receiving. Only by seeing a love relationship this way can we **experience any partnership gratefully, as a gift from God**.

 Below are contrasting mindsets and habits that will produce more illness or wellness in people, depending on how they use the neutral resources of *sexual (and gender) identity, style, and orientation:*

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| ***Sickening Beliefs and Lifestyles*** | ***Healthy Beliefs and Lifestyles*** |
| Gender orientation and style are genetically fixed.  | We can train ourselves to enjoy new choices, ask for help. |
| After 12 or 13, we all need sexual activity/release. | Abstinence shows us sex is a tamable desire, not a need. |
| Everyone has a sexual pin code that turns them on. | Maybe not yet: keeping a mystique online attracts wellness. |
| Forbidden fruit is extra tasty, exciting, rewarding. | Violating trust in a nonsexual relationship harms like incest. |
| Erotic, seductive sex is hotter, so go for it now! | Only in committed marriage will erotic heat not burn us. |
| Paying for sex keeps it safe, automatic, impersonal.  | Any money exchange in sex objectifies all its participants. |
| Sex is most exciting when it goes wild without limits. | Being free within limits protects, grows us, *and* our freedoms.  |
| Sex gives relief from boredom, loneliness, and shame. | For a short while, but then they come back harder than ever. |
| My body image improves when people are attracted to me, so posting my attractive pictures helps that. | My image of my body depends on what I believe about it, how I treat it, and how I allow others to see and treat it. |
| Showing our bodies online builds self-esteem, as the more likes you get, the more you like yourself. | Going public with our private parts lets them be passed around by abusive trolls who use and degrade us, in public. |
| Sharing our bodies sexually is how we create love, because without sex, love can’t be real or lasting. | By saving full sex and nudity for fully committed marriage, we’ll feel more safe, special, beautiful every year we live.  |
| *Hungry love seeks to* *consume* experiences of love, affection, beauty, and desire, but cheapens them. | *Healthy love shares* experiences of love, affection, beauty, and desire for each other, celebrating and protecting them. |
| Love will make you lose control, obsess, have mood swings, tolerate pain, and rationalize idolizing, deceiving, and being dependent on each other *[all qualities of addictions].* | Healthy sexual love inspires in both parties’ personal growth of freedom, calm, honesty, gratitude, spiritual depth, loyalty, self-confidence, support, awareness of beauty, and balancing safety and risk *[all qualities of personal integrity].* |