

**From Self to Self:
Masturbation
as the Future of Sex**

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SUMMARY. Despite decades of slow progress, masturbation often holds a unique place of shame and derision among sexual experiences. Much of what is hidden most carefully are the fantasies that come with masturbation, which often include imaginary bisexual and polyamorous excursions one would never reveal to one's partners. Opening up the gateways of the heart to our partners and friends, and sharing our feelings about and experience of masturbation, can be truly liberating and life-affirming. Several group masturbation workshops conducted by the author are described. The idea of compersion, which is the full embrace of another person's pleasure, is explained in the context of witnessed masturbation experiences. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2004 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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WHAT IS IT ABOUT MASTURBATION? INTRODUCTION AND CONCEPTS

What is it in today's world that makes us shun discussion about self-pleasuring and fear discovery that we like to bring ourselves to orgasm?

In the old days, word got out that masturbation was the vilest of all evils, and that it caused madness and blindness and was tantamount to sodomy. People believed it. In some communities, these pseudo-Biblical and life-denying arguments still carry a lot of weight, and when you mix them with the urgent, burning sexual curiosity that boils out of most adolescents, they produce quite a volatile mix of fear and desire. It's enough to warp one's entire personality, to lead one to question whether their very existence is right. The message of negative sexuality can move through groups of friends and, like that old pamphlet, do significant damage way beyond its intended target.

However, American society also has come a long way in the past three or four decades. The work of pioneers like Betty Dodson, who wrote about masturbation and created all-women weekend masturbation workshops once a month for 25 years, has both helped matters and serves as a barometer of change. Her book *Sex for One* has sold about a million copies, and her Website (BettyDodson.com) is extraordinarily popular. So is Solotouch.com, an all-ages reader-created site where people tell the stories of their masturbation experiences. It is clear that while many contributors feel some apprehension

about masturbating, most of them get over it quickly and see nothing wrong with what they feel is a perfectly natural pleasure. It helps to have encouragement, which thousands of other reader stories provide.

A few other things are clear from browsing Solotouch. One is that a lot of boys and men masturbate with their peers, and a lot of girls and women do the same. If they don't do it with one another, many are thinking about and desiring same-sex masturbation experiences even though most consider themselves straight. It would appear that same-sex sharing of masturbation is not just a healthy way to begin one's sexual journey, but also a helpful, pleasurable place for adults to explore themselves and one another.

One of the most common fantasies shared is being seen masturbating, which offers a depth of emotional emancipation and individual expression that is not possible in other forms of sex. I call it *being witnessed* in one's pleasure. It comes very close to one person directly giving another person the right to exist.

It doesn't take a lot of logic to run that backwards: Denying people's right to masturbate, or denying their good feelings about it, is to quite directly deny them the right to be who they are and feel what they feel. And despite the progress that's been made, it still happens a lot. I don't think there's any denying that angst over self-given pleasure is related to the concept of original sin, a sense of shame about life that was brought to Greece by Paul in the first century.

I often experiment with theories of personality that account for the development of people's consciousness in terms of how other people responded to their early sensual and sexual awakening, and how they felt about our masturbation. What were those big people thinking, vibing and saying to us? What did they leave out? What were their apprehensions about masturbation? Can you imagine your parents, or your grandparents, in their self-given moments of surrender? Can you imagine them seeing you? It is usually squeamish territory.

I have a feeling a lot of the apprehension about masturbation hinges on the essentially bisexual nature of the experience, beginning with the fact that sex with oneself is a same-sex experience, hence, a queer experience (though few people think of it that way, it is true, and most sexual feelings are percolating in the unconscious). Queer still comes with a stigma, and there is enormous segregation between the world of straight sex and the queer world; that's what those people do, and this is what I do. Not only does masturbation transgress the queer divide, it also equalizes the erotic marketplace. We all do it, gay, lesbian, straight, bi, old, young—demographically speaking, masturbation crosses every barrier. Masturbation is egalitarian sexuality in a world where sex is one of the biggest (and most petty) power trips.

In one's mind, one can be free. One is not always physically free (or so it seems), but if nowhere else, in the world of the imagination, freedom is possible. With that freedom, we will surely imagine ourselves with anyone we

want, doing anything we want. The imagination takes us, for example, outside the strict and rigid boundaries of marriage or monogamy. We can go down on our partner's best friend, or do them both together; we can have the most anonymous, experimental, dominant, submissive or genuinely dark erotic experiences and nobody can control us—much to the contrary of our spoken and unspoken relationships.

In their fantasies and desires, most people are polyamorous: we humans have sexual relationships with people outside our committed partnerships, with people who are unavailable and, for sure, with those of their same sex.

I would propose that the fantasy aspect of masturbation is, in today's world, its most taboo quality. It contradicts the prudish image most of us work so hard to portray to the world, our cool, cultivated nonchalance about pleasure and desire. One can be prim or gentlemanly by day and a raging whore by night (or on lunch breaks, bathroom breaks or in the car, as so often happens). The best way to avoid the discussion of what one thinks about when masturbating is to avoid the whole issue. And that results in a lot of pent-up steam, secrets and hidden desires. Often a kind of high-pressure membrane that exists between intimate partners who don't share that particular aspect of who they are—their innermost desires—and would never dream of doing so. Few would trade the image of good husband or wife for a raging bisexual slut. Yet this denial is dreadfully painful to bear.

One exercise I suggest to partners who want to put a little fire into their sex life is to create a safe space and, going one at a time, masturbate while fantasizing out loud. I suggest that a firm agreement of amnesty be created before the game, that is, that both partners agree to forgive their partner for their desires, no matter what they are. And then just tell the truth. Let it out, free-associating. Learn to encourage one another to desire, to desire whatever, to witness the truth and live with the truth and be fully real in one another's eyes. This creates a closeness that can feel dangerous but is also vivid and satisfying as we go beyond all the emotional mannerisms and choreographed, even crystallized moves of how we present ourselves to our partner.

Usually it's a heck of a lot of fun, if we remember to love. The love that embraces the pleasures and desires of another person is called compersion. Compersion is often described as the opposite of jealousy. I describe it as the place we reach when we get beyond jealousy. It is an affirmation of our partner's love and pleasure rather than an attempt to exercise control over it. It seems clear that jealousy is one thing that gets in the way of most people's attempts to explore unconventional sexuality.

Jealousy goes far beyond what we think it's addressing in sex and relationships; it is a kind of distorted attempt to control the flow of another person's emotions, combined with the fear of a wrenching pain of abandonment. Compersion offers us a way to love that is based on something other than control and conditions. It offers us a way to accept or at least coexist with one another's feelings, which is all we can really do in an honest relationship.

For the past four years at conferences of *Loving More* magazine, I have helped create the communal masturbation experience at what is usually a very intellectually based gathering. In these experiences, adult men and women of all sexual orientations have spent an evening masturbating together, a distinctly sensory, emotional and erotic experience. The process is not about contact sex, but rather, about seeing, hearing, feeling, expressing and showing the erotic.

Loving More is a magazine dedicated to exploring the possibilities of committed, devoted and whole relationships that go beyond the one man, one woman formula given to us as love's mandatory limit. As the years have progressed, I have brought my ideas into the *Loving More* community, carrying with me the understanding that if we can love ourselves shamelessly and fearlessly, it's a lot easier to love and be loved by others.

I would like to use this space to offer my observations from having presented about a dozen masturbation workshops of a variety of shapes and sizes. I would like to offer what I see as a few rich possibilities for the polyamorous and bisexual communities in their truly noble quest for fostering open communication and honesty, redesigning relationship models, understanding sex and teaching compersion.

I am one person who feels that bisexuality implies polyamory, and vice versa. While it is possible to totally segregate relationship experiences, to switch sexual orientations every 10 years, or to hide one's male partner from one's other male partner (and thus avoid same-sex acknowledgement of same-sex desire), when we get honest all that denial is seen for what it is. Bisexual means both genders and both genders means more than one person. Of all the things that have emerged from experiencing men and women masturbating, I've come to appreciate how similar men and women of both orientations are beneath all the window-dressing and cultural rules about sexuality.

A FEW STORIES

Ace of Cups

At a workshop for seven people held in 2000, we played a game which I call Ace of Cups. This is the Tarot card of love itself, the 'fountain that was not made by the hands of men' in the words of Grateful Dead lyricist Robert Hunter. The Ace of Cups is the wellspring of joy and Eros (the Tarot reminds us that these things really do exist).

The setting was a warm, secure, private space, in the country near Seattle, phones unplugged. The group was mixed gender; four women, three men. Two of the women were lesbian.

The group got together the prior night for dinner followed by a kind of self-pleasuring social, an icebreaker where we simply undressed and mastur-

bated together with no particular structure or intention. We then met for about two hours to talk the next morning, debrief the prior evening's experience and plan the events of the coming day. Everyone agreed in advance on the basic scenario, and what our boundaries were (invited touch only, watching and talking to people was okay).

When it was time to begin, we passed the full Tarot deck around and everyone turned over the top card. There was a kind of playful tension in the air. Who could it be? Will it be me? Will it be her? I'd really like to see her. I'd really like to *show* her . . .

Eventually, someone came to the Ace of Cups and got into the middle of the group. They described what kind of experience they wanted, and perhaps stated out loud what he or she was feeling as lying or sitting there naked. This was somewhat personal: coming out with your confessions of desire, like, for example, I want everyone touching me lightly, or holding me, while I make love to myself. Please talk to me. Please hold a mirror to my face, or I want to sit up in front of that big mirror. I want to fuck myself with that nice thing. I want to do it on my belly. Or face to face with a man. I'm a lesbian but I want a man close to me. Or whatever.

The value of this asking alone, just the mere words, has been estimated by government scientists to be worth a large number of therapy sessions.

Then it happens, with six people surrounding you, loving you, witnessing you, and telling you how beautiful you are, and how right it is that you feel this way. This is an experiment in exploring what might be called nourishing communication, the exact opposite of what we have so often experienced when masturbation was an 'issue': secrecy, shame, the fear of disapproval, and the terror of getting caught. These fetters, hung onto masturbation, I believe, lead to much of the sexual crisis that our culture faces. To find our freedom, we need to go back to the erotic source.

In this context, the idea is to feel anything you want, and show your stuff: we're going to love you. We need to love you. You need to love you. You need to be loved. We all gain in the equation.

Ah, sweet compersion.

After the person eases out of his/her experience, there is a short break (snack, water, bathroom), the cards were shuffled and passed around, and somebody else drew the Ace of Cups. This went on for about six hours, at the end of which we all felt like we knew something about one another. For we had all spoken and listened to and experienced the Universal Sexual Language, the inter-gender and inter-orientation tongue that we all know and understand.

Witnessed Solo Mirror Play

At a two-day workshop in California last summer, the first evening's activity (after the get-acquainted go-round, and a great dinner in the warm summer

evening) was to watch someone named Tori be with, well, play with, and well, really get down with herself in front of a mirror for about two hours, pretty much nonstop. She went at it. The approximately 12 watchers could talk, observe closely, gaze, stare, listen carefully and move freely about the cabin to try different vantage points.

The effect on all of us is profound. First of all, we are overwhelmed by Tori's honesty, as she opens up and watches herself and studies her face up close and does what really feels good to her. The experience is effortless; no one is required to do anything except feel. There is plenty to feel. Honesty is about feeling, and when we witness it, we want it for ourselves.

When she finally gives herself over to orgasm, we all understand. We are in agreement. We are in one space of beauty. Yet pleasant as this is, there's really a confrontation involved, including being face-to-face with a kind of absolute, that is, an expression of something absolutely and unabashedly human. There is no denying that the person in front of the mirror is an extension of ourselves, or a projection of who we want to be.

To meet this, to encounter this, we must become soft and allowing. This is the inner territory we reach when we no longer need to control the emotions and pleasure of another person. I think this is the easiest way to teach compersion, to immerse oneself in the unconditional approval of another person's pleasure.

We usually seek compersion in the context of our lover being sexual with another person, which can be very beautiful, but equally scary. In the context of witnessed masturbation, the experience is less threatening because it's not about one's lover having sex with someone else, by whom they might be swept away; rather, it's about watching someone one loves have sex with herself or himself. It is usually possible to allow someone we love to be this free without freaking out.

Compersion is the coveted secret elixir of emotions because it promises to turn the pain of jealousy into an ecstatic calm, or ecstatic release. It is the experience of *compassion for another person's pleasure*. There is more to it, but what I am getting to is that a fine way to feel compersion without having to confront jealousy is to just simply watch a person masturbate. For couples who are considering opening their relationships to other adults but scared about the jealousy, this is a fine way to get the feel for things, particularly in a group setting, for example, where three or more people are present.

A Healing Erotic Journey

What I have described are just two possible formats. I have tried lots of others, including a group of 10 people and one mirror and people individually taking a turn before the mirror. A few just watched. These people ranged from about 36 to 80 years old. Then there have been a variety of "traditional" Jack-and-Jill-offs, more social types of group masturbation experiences. For group

play, there are infinite possibilities once the space is opened and the agreements are made.

Sharing masturbation is good practice negotiating sexual agreements. Very often sex just happens, and we regret it, or go against our better judgment. When we share masturbation many details come out into the open, for open discussion: where do we do this, what are we going to do, who goes first, and so on.

There are more intimate options, too, such as two lovers inviting a friend to masturbate with them. Three-way sex might seem out of the question, water that's a little too deep, but masturbating together might be just delightfully right. Two couples can get together and do the same thing. And it's very nice one-on-one, with a friend or a lover. This is a truly versatile, deeply erotic form of expressing sensuality and sexuality. And it's clear that Lazarus Long never got to experience it in all his five thousand or so years of life, because it's anything but lonely.

Offering a vision of what is possible, I would like to experience a group of people meeting regularly, talking and masturbating together over an extended period of time—say, a year or two. I think that some very unusual, honest and beautiful experiences would emerge.

CONCLUSION: FROM SELF TO SELF

Part of the freedom of these experiences is that we are taking responsibility for our own pleasure. There is no overlay of feelings in the sense that we are usually accustomed to it. One can adore, worship and get off on the beauty of another person, but the experience is ultimately self-given, and it's very difficult to form attachments, or rather, gratefully easy not to. There is a claiming back of our pleasure that happens, and an enhanced state of awareness that *you are you and I am me*. All of our talk about boundaries is necessary precisely because, by whatever phenomenon, in more conventional love experiences we forget who is who. When masturbation is shared, there is no question who is who.

Many of us are looking for ways to more freely express our erotic natures without hurting ourselves or other people. We tend to have two modes of sex, alone, or hot and heavy with someone else. This is a wide middle ground, and a space wherein we can free one another of original sin.

One of my friends, Lindsey, put it this way: "As I read this, it occurred to me that perhaps regular partner sex is dependence, solo masturbation is independence, and masturbating in front of each other is moving towards interdependence . . . a time when you really affirm that the other person is sexually whole unto themselves, and you can be seen by another person as being sexually whole. I think this takes some of the 'neediness' out of the equation . . . it affirms that I am whole, you are whole, we don't *need* each other; instead

we're freely choosing to come together to share a moment." If interdependence is the way of the future, then shared masturbation is the future of sex.

As for the future of sex: in our search for a future, there are few places we have not already been. This is one of them, and it's a spacious, luxurious land where we really can be free because we really can be free to feel, and because we can really be individuals. Together.