

# CHAPTER TEN

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## THE EXILE OF THE EROTIC AND THE BOUNDARY- BREAKING SEXUAL

**M**any years ago I had the questionable privilege of babysitting a twelve-month-old baby named Maya, who was, in the classical sense of the term, quite cherubic. The cherub mystery in this case was that Maya was inexplicably wailing at top decibels. She wanted something, and I could not for the life of me figure out what it was. All I knew was that she kept on crying out, “Nana. Nana.” Now, “nana” I knew. It means banana, the essential tool of babysitting. So I kept trying to stuff bananas into Maya’s clenched hands, which she would repeatedly thrust away as if I were some illiterate idiot who understood nothing about baby talk.

Finally, I distracted her with my vast repertoire of ridiculous baby faces and spoonfuls of every soft food available. Nothing availed until a spoonful of smashed peas suddenly, mysteriously, quieted her down. When Maya’s dad got home I told him, “We had a hard half hour there.

Maya kept screaming out for ‘nanas.’ So I tried to give her bananas, which she adamantly refused.”

“So you gave her the smashed peas, eh?” Brad replied nonchalantly.

I blinked. “How did you know!?”

Dad explained. “When Maya started eating real food, her favorite thing in the world was bananas. She thinks ‘nanas’ are the yummiest things around. But over time the word ‘nana’ has sort of transcended being about bananas and has just become a general appellation for anything that falls under the category of ‘really yummy.’ So when she wants something yummy, like peas or sweet potatoes, she just calls out ‘nana.’ And since I gave her some peas this morning, it figures that is what she would have had on her mind.”

I was floored! The mystery was revealed! What a feat of linguistic brilliance! Not only is Maya cherubic, but she is also a genius. So what if it wasn’t my amazing repertoire of baby faces that had so amused her. This infant had brought me to satori, enlightenment! I suddenly understood the whole conundrum of Eros that had been sifting through my mind. Eros and “nanas” are the same thing! We have a little taste of sex—it’s inordinately “yummy.” It is called Eros. But then we get a taste of cross-country skiing. It, too, is inordinately yummy. It, too, is Eros. And what about writing that vivid haiku the other day? Erotic! Or the photograph you took of a flock of starlings forming a breathtaking spectacle at sunset? Erotic! Perhaps you listened to that old song you love so much, the one that stirs your deepest longing and has you singing out loud with wild abandon? Eros!

Just as I thought Maya was talking about bananas when she said “nana,” most of us think we are talking about sex when we say “Eros.” Yes, Eros is sexual, but it also transcends the sexual. Eros actually means all the places where I am fully present, on the inside, yearning, and connected. Eros is the experience of being radically alive in my life. Eros takes the sexual and lets it stand as the model for all that fills our deep desire. We are all crying out for Eros, but instead of feeding us on the sweet divine stuff our soul craves, society is trying to sate our deepest desires with sex, which is like trying to stuff a baby with bananas when she really wants peas! Give bananas to a baby who needs peas, and she

will continue crying, her hunger unabated. Our society is in need of Eros. So being fed only sex leaves us hungry, desperate, and crying out. We are calling out for Eros. Not sex, but Eros.<sup>25</sup>

## EXILED INTO THE SEXUAL

Now let's go back to our lost Ark and its cherubs situated in the inner sanctum of the temple. The Ark in particular and the temple in general are the mythic symbols of the Shechinah, that is, of the erotic experience. That is precisely what the mystery texts mean when they say the Shechinah dwells between the cherubs atop the Ark. The fall of the temple is thus not a mere historical event. In myth, it represents the fall of Eros, the exile of the erotic. This experience is called by the Kabbalistic masters the exile of the Shechinah.

But where did it go? To where was Eros exiled? The answer is that the exile of the Shechinah is the exile of the erotic into the sexual. The holy Eros of the cosmos that takes place at every level of reality is exiled to the small eros of the sexual. That is to say, when the only place we access the core qualities of Eros is in the sexual, then Eros, or the Shechinah, is in exile. When the only time you feel that you are on the inside is during great sex, then the Shechinah is in exile. When intense desire is a feeling you touch only before exploding in orgasm, then your life is poor indeed. When you only participate in the yearning force of being alive while having sex, Eros has fallen. When you only feel the wholeness and interconnectivity of the all during a sexual experience, then Eros is in exile.

The Secret of the Cherubs is that sex is our spiritual guide. Later chapters of this book will outline the twelve faces of Eros, showing how each one is modeled in the sexual. These are the essential qualities needed to live a life of wonder in body, mind, and spirit. However, we have lost our access to them. These qualities wind up not only being modeled by the sexual but also, tragically, being accessed in our lives virtually only in the sexual. As a result, much of our life feels drab and vacant, a pale reflection of what we once dreamed life could be. Our work; our friendships; our relationship to nature, knowledge, the spirit, and to our families,

neighborhoods, and communities—all of these have been disenchanting and de-eroticized. We need to return to Eros.

We cannot live in a nonerotic world, so unconsciously we seek compensation. We look to get our erotic fix in the sexual. But this doesn't work. For when you de-eroticize the entire world except for sex, then the sexual collapses as well. You see, we all have erotic needs. These needs require attention in all aspects of our lives, but if we ignore them in most aspects, then we demand that the sexual fulfill all of our erotic needs. And so sexuality shrugs, collapsing under the weight of a burden it cannot bear. When we ask sex to be the sole source of funding our erotic bank, sex has little choice but to default. Sex collapses under the weight of an impossible demand. When sex implodes because it is our sole source of Eros, it begins a cascading domino effect of collapsing ethics all across every arena of our lives and every sector of society.

So as you can now see, the fall of Eros brings in its wake the collapse of sex as well. The modern zeitgeist has slain all the gods save Aphrodite, the goddess of sexual love. Yet she cannot survive alone. We wonder why she has abandoned us. We ask ourselves incessantly, why is sex not working? French philosopher Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality* suggests mockingly that we vaunt sex as our great secret and yet talk about it incessantly. Behind all our talk about sexuality we are all frantically asking, "Why has sex not redeemed me? I finally got some, and I am just as depressed, lonely, and confused as I was yesterday."

It is something like the biblical story about Balaam and his donkey, on their way to curse the wandering Hebrews. The donkey is unable to proceed on the path because an angel is blocking his way. Balaam, the great magical seer of the ancient world, is unable to see this angel. So he blames the ass and starts to beat it. The donkey surprisingly speaks up, "I've only done good for you. Why do you beat me up when things don't go right?" The reason, of course, is because Balaam wants something more than the donkey can give. He wants the donkey to take him where he wants to go, so he blames the donkey when the journey fails.

We are much the same way with the donkey of sex. We think the problem is with sex. It refuses to take us where we need to go. But in actuality, the adamant refusal of sex to take us forward is simply symptomatic

of the larger malfunction. The erotic endeavor has been betrayed. But with all our information and sophistication, we still cannot see. So we invest all our energy in sex, little realizing that what we crave is not “mere sex,” but an experience of genuine and sustained Eros.

## EXILE WITHIN AN EXILE

In the language of the Kabbalists, we are now in an exile within an exile. The first exile of the Shechinah is the exile of the erotic into the sexual. The second is the exile of the erotic *within* the sexual. In this second exile, the erotic is banished to a very limited domain within the sexual. We can no longer find the erotic in most of the arenas of the sexual. In order to touch the intense desire that makes us feel alive, lost and found in the infinity of the moment, many people need a sexuality that breaks the boundaries of their own authentic story. In the second exile we only experience the raw pulsation of Eros' pleasure during sex that violates rules and breaks boundaries—transgressive or illicit sexuality.

In order to find Eros after the first wave of arousal has begun to fade, we either upgrade or downgrade sex. The first, the idealized upgrade of sex, often expresses itself in the search for sex in the form of the ideal true love. It is, of course, so ideal that it is inaccessible, leaving us forever fantasizing about the perfect lover or reading endless varieties of the same sexy romance novel.

The expression of the second, the downgrade of sex, appears in a couple of ways. It sometimes appears as degrading forms of pornography and varieties of sexual abuse. Sexual abuse includes all its tragic classical expressions, plus a variety of new forms that have emerged in our culture. These new forms include false charges of sexual abuse by people who claim to be victims. Their complaints may distort the memory of a genuine sexual encounter, or they may be fabricated to serve vindictive or political purposes. Internet smear campaigns are becoming a feature of everyday living. It is doubtful whether Martin Luther King Jr.'s personal life would have survived the takedown culture that dominates the internet today. When J. Edgar Hoover attempted to destroy King by outing

his extramarital affairs, the only tools he had available were pre-internet. Hoover would almost certainly have used the internet to attack King for clergy sex abuse, had he been able to. One can imagine that Hoover would have presented himself as rescuer of victims. This kind of perpetration under the guise of a noble cause has been termed “sexual McCarthyism.” Such new forms of abuse are degradations of the sexual.

The second expression of the downgrade of sex—played out in order to reclaim some of the rawness of Eros lost—is in boundary-breaking sexuality, particularly where you break the boundaries of your own authentic story or values.

The fall of the temple is the mythic expression of the exile of the erotic not only into the sexual but specifically into boundary-breaking sexuality. Listen in on a strange and fascinating Talmudic discussion.<sup>26</sup>

A man is struck by the beauty of a particular woman. His heart becomes sick. He falls deathly ill. Doctors are consulted.

Their response: “He cannot be healed unless he has sexual intercourse with her.”

The sages’ succinct reply: “Let him die and not sleep with her!”

“So let her stand naked before him,” urge the doctors.

“Let him die, and she should not stand naked before him!” the sages reply.

“Let her talk to him from behind a fence [erotic conversation],” press the doctors.

“Let him die and not be engaged by her in erotic conversation,” answer the sages.

This striking case becomes a *locus classicus* in the debates of the academy for many generations to come. One of the central issues debated and recorded in the Talmud was the identity of the beautiful woman. One school held that she was married; a second school held that she was single. According to the first school, it was understandable why there would be opposition to a sexual encounter between a lovesick man and a married woman.

“And if she were single?” queries a voice in the Talmud.

“Surely we should allow her to save his life through some sort of minimal sexual engagement—verbal, visual, or otherwise?”

“No!” roars a second voice from the pages. “For if we did so, it would undermine the personal integrity of women.”

“Well, then,” offers a third voice. “If she is single and he is single . . . let them marry!”

“No, for if he married her,” responds the same voice to its own query, “she would not settle his spirit [she would not satisfy his erotic need], for it is written, ‘Stolen waters are sweet.’”

“Stolen waters are sweet.” This terse epigram means quite simply that after a man is married, his sexual excitement will recede and he will not be fulfilled. Only in the context of “stolen waters”—the thrill of boundary-breaking sex—can the man in the story be sated. He is only interested in the woman as an already married or unavailable partner. Once she is available, his lust will quickly subside.

We should not view this as the peculiar weakness of the man in the story. Rather, the man is a symbol of the times. And here we get to the essence of the text, where the wisdom masters draw a most provocative conclusion: “From the day the temple was destroyed, the taste of sex has been taken away and given to sinners.” That is to say, once the temple has fallen, once Eros is lost, the “taste of sex” is experienced only in boundary-breaking sexual relationship! On the face of it, the passage makes little sense. What could the fall of the Jerusalem Temple possibly have to do with varieties of sexual satisfaction?

Once we understand the nature of the text, however, it begins to open itself up to interpretation. The “taste of sex” is another term for Eros. The temple was seen as the seat of Eros. The fall of the temple symbolizes a mythic shift in the erotic psyche of the world, the exile of the Shechinah not just into the sexual but more precisely into the transgressively sexual. In this passage, adultery is the paradigm of boundary-breaking sex. But boundary-breaking sex can also mean looking for superficial novelty to elicit any sense of erotic thrill. This is pseudo Eros.

The text suggests that in the tragic, post-temple world of fallen Eros, men felt they could find erotic satisfaction only in the sexual—and then only if it was the boundary-breaking sexual. It is not by accident that a thousand years later the great Western love story sung by the troubadours was that of Tristan and Iseult. These lovers personify the sweet and mad passion of romantic love. Of course, Iseult is betrothed to another man when she and Tristan meet. Stolen waters. A modern reincarnation of this scenario is a movie called *Unfaithful*. In its lead advertisement, it asks this question: “Would you risk everything in a moment of passion?” Of course, the premise is that the moment of passion, the “taste of sex,” could only be available in the context of being “unfaithful.” Marketing executives are our highest-paid and often best psychologists. Even if not all of us yearn for that unfaithful moment, most of us understand all too well the hole that it is desperately trying to fill. We are desperately searching for Eros in all the wrong places.

The yearning for a rebuilt temple is not a carpenter’s fantasy. Rather, it is the dream of a world in which raw Eros—which today has been exiled to boundary-breaking, illicit sexuality—will be accessed in the context of committed relationships. This text suggests that at least one of the goals of temple consciousness is *to commit adultery . . . with your wife*. Or with your committed partner. Commitment can mean many things in many contexts. The goal is to move beyond the need for stolen waters and to be able to access the full power and passion of the sensual within the context of your own highest story, where your own waters are satisfying and sweet.

## THE LIBERATION OF EROS: RECLAIMING SACRED BOUNDARY BREAKING

What needs to happen before we can access the full power and passion of the sensual in our committed relationships and not only in boundary-breaking sex? We need to liberate Eros from its exile. Remember, it is a double exile: not only is Eros exiled in the sexual, but it is also exiled in the “sinful sexual,” the transgressive sexual. To liberate Eros



means to access its core qualities not only in great sex but also in all dimensions of life. Where sex is concerned, liberating Eros means accessing its raw power not in transgressive sex but through boundary breaking within our chosen, committed relationships.

To understand what the Liberation of Eros requires we need to enter the Secret of the Cherubs even more deeply.

As we will see in subsequent chapters, the core qualities of Eros, all of its primary faces, are about different forms of authentic boundary breaking. Eros is always boundary breaking. That is its nature. Its quality of wholeness and interconnectivity breaks through the walls that make us see ourselves as isolated and separate—an alienated part—that make us act in ways discordant with all life and damaging to others and to ourselves.

Eros yearns to break all artificial boundaries of contracted identity. It yearns to break through old patterns in a relationship to reveal authentic levels of goodness, beauty, depth, and delight. Reaching for interior depth in all realms of life requires the boundary breaking of limited beliefs and old labels that shackle us. It often means breaking through the sham of conventional politeness and showing up with a radical fullness of presence.

Finding newness in the old is key to the authentic boundary breaking that is part of the elemental essence of Eros. This is true in terms of both our relationships and our core sense of self. Breaking through to a new depth in relationships is wildly sexy. Breaking through to a new creative insight is incredibly erotic. But breaking through to an entirely new identity is the most wildy erotic move of all. Moving from the limited identity of separate self to the full erotic glory of unique and evolutionary self is the penultimate in boundary breaking.

In the tradition of the Secret of the Cherubs, when the temple falls, the Shechinah goes into exile. Her exile is the exile of Eros. Where does Eros go in its exile? Into the sexual—in particular, into the “sinful sexual.” What that means is that the quality of authentic boundary breaking that is so core to true Eros is exiled in the sexual. When we no longer break boundaries for real—boundaries of false or limited identity, of superficiality, of old patterns in relationship—then the only place we have left to break boundaries in is sex.

When we no longer find newness, new depth in the old, then we look for superficial novelty to fill our erotic needs. Because we have exiled the erotic into the sexual we look to the sexual to fill all of our erotic need for boundary breaking. The result is devastating. Sex begins to only provide a thrill for us when it is boundary breaking. We need some new technique, some new person, or some new form of degradation, to elicit any sense of erotic thrill. This, however, is not Eros but pseudo Eros. Pseudo Eros can never fill the emptiness in any kind of profound or sustained manner. Just like in all forms of pseudo erotic addiction, we need to keep upping the ante in order to get any thrill.

None of this speaks against new forms of play in the sexual. New forms of sexual play and pleasure, be they soft or wild, or by mutual agreement more rough and raw, are all potentially sacred and awesome. In fact, learning how to break boundaries in the sexual is precisely what can inspire us to break boundaries in all the dimensions of our nonsexual lives. That is precisely what we mean when we say that the sexual models the erotic. The sexual points the way to the necessary boundary breaking in every domain of life. But what keeps us from breaking these boundaries? Quite simply, it is fear.

But when Eros is in exile, then instead of the sexual modeling the erotic, the erotic is exiled in the sexual. The sexual then becomes the only place that boundaries are broken. Eros then devolves to pseudo Eros. This is what the ancient text meant when it said, “From the day the temple was destroyed, the taste of sex (the genuine erotic thrill of raw pleasure and delight) was given over only to sinners (to illicit, transgressive sexuality).”

The text means that when we lose temple consciousness—that is to say, when Eros is exiled into the sexual and the sexual is asked to meet all our erotic needs—then sexuality collapses under an erotic burden it cannot bear. The nature of the collapse is precisely that sex with our committed partners is no longer erotically charged. Eros devolves to pseudo Eros. Sex no longer works in our lives unless it is breaking a boundary. This is not authentic boundary breaking but pseudo boundary breaking. It does not take much transformational work to introduce a new form of sexual degradation or a new form of sexual risk.

## BREAKING THE BOUNDARY OF FEAR

All true gnosis requires transformation. Without doing the work of transformation, there is no new knowing. “Knowing,” remember, in the original Hebrew, means erotic knowledge. It is only in your willingness to break the boundary of your contraction that you are able to transcend your own corruption. That is the only way that authentic consciousness is born.

The universe wants our fullest, most potent pleasure, expression, wholeness, and aliveness. And the structure of the universe is such that if we don’t earn it—if we don’t participate in our own transformation—we don’t get the pleasure. It doesn’t become integrated into us. If it’s just a free gift, it doesn’t become who we are.

If I’m having a moment of emptiness, I can try to fill it with pseudo Eros. Or I can choose to just sit with the emptiness. When I sit for just fifteen minutes, I’m filled with the Eros of reality. What rises up is the fullness of my unique being. This gives me pleasure that’s beyond whatever the hit of pseudo Eros might have been. Life is what we do with our emptiness.

To stay in the emptiness, we must break the boundary of our fear: the fear that, deep inside, we are nothing but empty. We cover up the emptiness with hits of pseudo Eros because we are afraid that we are not enough. Knowing that we deserve to be loved, feeling that we deserve to be loved, requires breaking the boundary of our ego’s contraction into separateness and exploding into the gnosis that we are a son or daughter of God. When you are willing to stay in the emptiness, you reveal yourself to you. Your Eros arises in the experience of sitting in your own identity, in your radical uniqueness, in the depth of your own story.

## WHY WE HAVE AFFAIRS: THE BETRAYAL OF SELF

To really get the full potency of Erotic realization that we have just pointed toward, let’s jump ahead for a moment. In chapter seventeen we

will talk about the fifth face of Eros, Uniqueness. We will see that to live the erotic life is to undergo a series of transformations of identity—from separate self to true self to unique self to evolutionary unique self. Each transformation requires breaking the boundary of the old limited identity, expanding our sense of self, and living into a greater erotic vision of who we truly are. That is where the real erotic boundary breaking takes place. We talked above about the story of the man who only wants to have an affair with the woman when she is married because “stolen waters are sweet.” It is in the transgressive movement—the boundary breaking, the stolen waters—that Eros lives. People have an affair not because they want to betray their partner.\* We have affairs because we feel that we have betrayed ourselves. We have lost our own core sense of aliveness. We have fallen out of our erotic life. Remember, Eros is the experience of being radically alive. We have an affair to reclaim our aliveness, to find our lost Eros. This, however, is the exile of the erotic. Having an affair bypasses the genuine source of our erotic predicament. The betrayal of all our beloveds is always rooted in a prior betrayal of self. A hidden affair is pseudo Eros. Authentic Eros can only be liberated from within.

To liberate Eros we must transgress our smaller selves. We must break the boundaries of our limited identity—from separate self to true self to unique self to evolutionary unique self. We must commit to have an affair with a newer version of ourselves. We must commit adultery with a memory of our future self. That is the liberation of Eros.

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\* To be clear, we think that hidden affairs are suboptimal because they involve the betrayal of a partner. They may, however, not be the only or even the primary betrayal in the relationship. The fate of an affair might end the relationship. Or it might be turned into the destiny of a new beginning. It might open the couple to a deeper, more erotic, more ethical, and more authentic partnership. But there are no easy dogmas here. Sometimes, at this moment in our evolution, that which is hidden allows the marriage and all of the good it holds to thrive. But ultimately we need to evolve love. We need a culture which can hold broader erotic possibility with integrity and not demand that people make impossibly anguished choices or else pay a corrupt social price of shaming and condemnation.