

Money, sex and power: spirituality, shadow and wonder

My friend Roxanne (Jean) Lanier has written a perfect opener for an essay on sex:

'A man sits up in bed next to a woman. 'Was it good for you?' he asks apprehensively. 'It was marvelous,' she replies. Satisfied with her response, he rolls over and tries to sleep. She too tries to sleep. Instead of sleeping, however, they each lie awake, wondering in silence.'

My comments on this topic, perhaps juicy in apprehension, will prove in the end to be not much more than a series of wonderings. I will be pleased if they are wonderings and not merely commonsense assumptions dressed up for publication. I wonder about this difference: given the effects of professional training and mores, how can we detect when, and to what extent, we are thinking, speaking, writing, and wondering authentically, or when merely receiving conventional ideas?

I suspect that our 'wondering in silence,' as in the passage by Roxanne Lanier, above, is almost always more authentic than our wondering for public consumption. If posturing is scarcely avoidable in general, it would seem completely inescapable from any one of the six concepts in this essay. It is especially unproductive to write on the shadow of one's experience since shadow, by definition, refers to those elements and forces which work unconsciously. To be so conscious of one's motives in money, sex or power games as to be able to write about them would leave them as problems, but not as shadow?

I want to approach the first three terms in the title of my essay—money, sex and power—from a spiritual perspective; but to claim spirituality concerning even one of them is to risk hubris and almost certainly run foul of shadow. Hence, I wonder whether I can say anything concerning my relation to them that isn't at least a mix of spirit and shadow, and perhaps all shadow dressed in spiritual garb? And is this caution which claims to issue from modesty not also shadow? I wonder.

This is the same kind of wonder I experienced in college philosophy courses when I first read existentialists such as Jean-Paul Sartre: Is it possible to escape, to be an exception to, self-deception? Now, after thirty-five years of reading philosophy—and after thirty-one years of marriage—I'm still wondering.

As Sartre rightly argued, not to know about self-deception is itself a form of self-deception; not to admit to the reality of the shadow in our own individual psycho-spiritual experience is itself shadow. By self-deception, Sartre doesn't just mean ignorance of self, of my true thoughts and feelings; he means an active, disabling protection of my self from my own inner, deeper, disturbing self, including self-protecting and self-enhancing motives and needs. Sartre's is only one version of many post- and neo-Freudian accounts of our increasingly well-documented ability to self-deceive. Scarcely any activities of our lives provide such rich opportunities for self-deception and shadow behavior as our relationship to money, sex and power.

Do we ever escape this shadowy realm, this cave of self-aggrandizement? I wonder. Perhaps Roxanne's essay might help.

'While there is nothing so disappointing as the emptiness we can feel after 'having sex,' there is nothing quite so fulfilling as the ecstasy we experience in truly meeting and joining with another person in the spirit of reverence for the total being of that person. It is in such encounters that we can know and love the God who is love. This love has nothing to do with possession or obsession. It has to do with freedom, with spirit.' (p. 20)

With Roxanne's sage words in my mind, I asked for guidance that I too might write something helpful and truthful concerning the relationship between my daily life and the high teachings, particularly those of Rudolf Steiner, on which I have been pondering, writing, and lecturing for the past several decades. How is it possible to get from 'having sex,'—or making money, using power—to an experience of God, spirit, or freedom?

Since my teen years, money, sex and power have been driving forces in, or of, my life but almost always packaged or colored by other values. The important topics are usually mediated, wrapped and veiled by a mix of positive and negative goals and pressures such as responsibility, service, sympathy and affection, as well as control, manipulation, opposition, and antipathy. When I set out to say something about these three concepts, I have to get at them through relationships, within the context of my original family, my wife and children, my career and position, my karmic situation, and, as Roxanne Lanier reminds us, within my relation to being, to spirit and to freedom.

Part of the schooling with respect to money-sex-power, as well as with spirituality and shadow, is to strive to know what I have brought to this life, to this incarnation, including the experiences and relationships appropriately lying in wait for me, and the capacities I should ideally develop this time around. From what source of guidance, and by what markers, can I know to what extent I am approximately in the right set of relationships and the right work?

Neither a map nor the terrain alone can give us full knowledge. Living contact with terra firma can be tremendously enhanced by a picture of that place in relation to others, and the layers of places, and relation of layers, etc. So, too, with the self: each lived experience is both unique and part of a context of meanings. Hence, the utility of maps for biographical as well as spatial experience. Contemporary social sciences, including most recent Western philosophies and psychologies, tend to ignore or deny both the unique and the inner in favor of the generic, or what we might call the trackable or mapable. According to the modern western paradigm, all else is marginal or fictional.

By contrast, Rudolf Steiner's spiritual scientific research emphasizes the unique experience of the 'I,' or spirit, the spiritual Self which stands behind the astral body or soul, etheric body and physical body. If we aspire to the inner experience of the true 'I,' of the unique yet infinite and universal reality, there might be a tendency to focus on this achievement at the expense of the other levels or layers of experience. We should note that Rudolf Steiner describes anthroposophy as 'a path of knowledge to lead the spiritual in, the individual to the spiritual in the universe.'

This description might give the mistaken impression that anthroposophy is concerned with the spiritual 'I,' but not particularly with the astral or soul life. Such an understanding would be distressing for all of us who seem to function only occasionally, and then with a mix of effort and grace, at the level of our spiritual 'I.' Most of the time, I seem to be

functioning at, and caught in, a level removed from my essential-spiritual self, whether in the astral, etheric or physical mode of consciousness. To be at the 'I' or spirit level is to be, at least momentarily, in a state of grace, outside the Platonic Cave, free from the Buddhist wheel of samsara—in short, at a very high and rare state of consciousness.

C. G. Jung's account of the Self covers much of the same ground as Steiner's psychology, though Steiner offers many artistic, social and epistemological ways of developing the relationships between the spiritual self and the spiritual which dwells within all dimensions of reality. Unfortunately, Jung doesn't tell us any more than Steiner does about money, sex and power, but Jung tells us a great deal about shadow (it is essentially a Jungian concept), and Steiner tells us more than we can absorb, and, I believe, more than any other contemporary teacher, about the reality of spirit. Steiner also describes very effective ways to relate spiritually to oneself and to the rest of the universe.

Three significant parts of the universe through which we can realize our spiritual nature, and the spiritual nature of the universe, fall under the headings of money, sex and power. Realizations of the spiritual through these three channels are inevitably mixed with shadow—unconscious psychic energies working against our conscious, and confident, attempts to work spiritually. My efforts to reach a deeper, truer, more spiritual plane by sexual acts, by the exercise of power, by financial decisions, are all partly caught in a mix of unconscious not-so-spiritual motives. As a white male with professional credentials, I am invested in holding on to privilege even while working to empower individuals and groups with relatively less power. I am generally careful, and secretive even to myself, in my determination to help those individuals empower themselves who will not do so at my expense.

I want my wife Ellen to have more power but I do not want any less. Whether with respect to my wife or colleagues, I want more power for those whom I love or to whom I am committed in some way, but unconsciously, and habitually, I want them to take more, as it were, from another pile, as though money and power were quantities. Materialism is widespread. Even sex lends itself to this kind of thinking—not so much in terms of measurable units as in hopelessly unfruitful wondering about who gets what, and my just deserts. Money, sex and power are not negative but they do invite some negative modes of consciousness. When we relate to any one of these activities in an enlightened and spiritually free way, the material realm is also freed and illumined. We thereby create a thing of beauty, truth and love concerning which gods, angels and bodhisattvas can join in celebrating with the entire human community.

Two of Steiner's foundational books, *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path*¹ and *How to Know Higher Worlds*², are intended to help us to relate spiritually to all realms of experience. These books, along with his approach to education, to sciences, and various artistic activities, can enable us to experience the spiritual dimension of processes such as sexual thoughts, feelings and actions; the handling of uneven power relationships; and the stirring of financial energies. Steiner doesn't tell his followers, or readers, what to do or what to think, but he does offer excellent advice on how to improve our thinking, feeling and willing so as to see into the secret life of complex and mysterious processes such as salaries, insurance and philanthropy; the relationship of eros and karma, eros and beauty, sexuality and love; power and service, power and domination, power and gender, power and temperament.

With respect to most of these situations and processes, I typically find myself to be working from a level removed from the 'I', but I know that my reading countless volumes by Rudolf Steiner, and other efforts which are essential for progress in spiritual science, have had some effect if only because I am increasingly aware of the contrast between my ordinary relationship to money, sex and power and a truly spiritual, 'I'-based relationship. I hope it is not merely my 56 years, but the 21 years of struggling with the help of anthroposophy, that have enabled me to be slightly less satisfied by, or attached to, surfaces. Whitenaleness, professional status, career-successful family members, are superficial characteristics in competition with the reality of inner life and genuine individuality.

Although I am deep into idolatry with respect to money, sex and power, I now can name the idols and know them for what they are, even while continuing to love them. To love idols 'is the essence of modern western consciousness; to work past idols to spiritual realities is the purpose of anthroposophy.

'Being caught in idolatry' is another way of describing thinking, feeling and willing on the etheric and physical levels of consciousness separate from the spiritual 'I', or thinking, feeling and willing bereft of imagination. When removed from the 'I' and from imagination, objects and relationships are more generic: money, sex and power, each in its myriad ways, become an 'it', a 'having'. In these modes, I seem to be able to locate, characterize and evaluate my experience, but only as appearance or surface. Actions and desires not rooted in my spiritual self are not relational. They are neither for the other nor for the universe; they are 'all mine.'

In such relationships, and in such a mode of consciousness, money, sex,

and power seem to me inseparable, and perhaps indistinguishable. They each have something of the 'I want', 'it's mine' feel against which Buddha, the Dalai Lama and Gandhi, as well as Christians such as Simone Weil and Dorothy Day, are especially insightful and exemplary. It seems safe to claim that virtually all spiritual teachings and disciplines aim to some extent at the transformation of desire and attachment consciousness.

Anthroposophy, the spiritual science of Rudolf Steiner, provides a particularly effective way of getting to the root of deep and complex processes such as money, sex and power, but in the effort to penetrate to inner reality we are liable to meet shadow mixed with spirit. Many spiritual teachers have been heard to remind their students, as we get closer to the light, we cast a longer shadow. This is why Rudolf Steiner's spiritual path, as explained in *How to Know Higher Worlds*, begins with humility and reverence.

Since most of us have to deal with money, sex and power, and since shadow is a permanent accompaniment of spirit, humility and reverence are indispensable if we are to have any hope of relating to money, sex or power in, or from, a spiritual consciousness, from the spiritual being that I essentially am, however dimly I perceive my true being. It would be excellent for each of us and for those whom we love if we were to make the most positive possible relationship between our 'Philosophy of Freedom' Self that each of us essentially is and the truest spiritual possibilities of money, sex and power. As Plato was the first to note, and Spinoza the second, 'All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.'³

Notes

¹ Jean (Roxanne) Lanier, 'From Having to Being: Toward Sexual Enlightenment,' in Georg Feuerstein, ed., *Enlightened Sexuality: Essays on Body-Positive Spirituality* (Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1989), p. 17.

² For a thorough and insightful account of the interplay of spirit and shadow in daily life from the perspective of a transpersonal psychologist steeped in Asian and western spiritual teachings, see Frances Vaughan, *Shadows of the Sacred: Seeing through Spiritual Illusions* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1995)

³ Robert A. McDermott, *The Essential Steiner* (SF: Harper San Francisco, 1984) p. 415.

⁴ Rudolf Steiner, *Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path: A Philosophy of*

Freedom, trans. Michael Lipson (NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1995)

⁵ Rudolf Steiner, *How to Know Higher Worlds: A Modern Path of Initiation*, trans. Christopher Bamford, afterword Arthur Zajonc (NY: Anthroposophic Press, 1994)

⁶ For idolatry, see Owen Barfield, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry* (NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1957)

⁷ Plato, *Law*; Spinoza, *Ethics*.

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The Bell Ringing verse

Robert McDermott

A verse is spoken each morning in Waldorf classrooms all over the world. Students begin the day with recitation which creates harmony and community in the classroom and the repetition builds strength in students. Although the verse is not discussed in class, it is important that the teacher has a deep understanding of it. Verses can accompany activities in the home as well, and create an atmosphere of togetherness and reverence. A grace before meals, a poem, prayer or verse at bedtime can become a family ritual.

The following is Robert McDermott's meditation on the Bell Ringing verse by Rudolf Steiner. Robert was neither a Waldorf student nor teacher, but is the parent of a student who attended a Waldorf school. He offers his meditation on this verse in the hope that it might encourage others to work with it themselves.

The verse was written by Rudolf Steiner for an eight year old student identified as R.G. The translation printed here uses gender inclusive language. Another translation 'At the Ringing of the Bells,' is printed in Rudolf Steiner, *Truth-Wrought-Words and Other Verses*, trans. Arvia MacKay Ege (NY Anthroposophical Press, 1979) p.13

The Bell Ringing verse

To wonder at beauty
Stand guard over truth
Look up to the noble
Decide for the good
This leads us truly
To purpose in living,
To right in our doing,

To peace in our feeling
To light in our thinking.
And teaches us trust
In the working of God,
In all that there is,
In the width of the world,
In the depth of the soul.