

*Higher enjoyments alone can satisfy the cravings of immortal man.  
We cannot circumscribe happiness within the limits of personal sense.  
The senses confer no real enjoyment.*

— Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, pp. 60

sensuality

U N M A S K E D

BY RON BALLARD

**YEARNINGS**, longings, cravings—art tries to depict them, philosophy tries to explain them, religion tries to ennoble them. And much of human existence is obsessed with our trying to fulfill each one. If you look deeply enough, you realize that the forms those desires take often mask deeper issues.

Substance addiction may mask a deeper desire for peace of mind. Gluttony may cover the yearning for an assurance of one's self-worth. Sexual promiscuity could indicate the longing to feel loved and cared for. Having deep yearnings may be understandable, but what's at issue is how we try to fulfill them. The assumption that the world can only be understood in physical terms—and thus be comprehended only through the five physical senses—is very strong. And this doctrine of sensuality insists all ideas are derived from, and are essentially reducible to, physical sensation. Furthermore, this doctrine often claims that the highest good lies in sensual gratification.

But sensuality, any reliance on physical sensation and direction, not only denigrates one's spiritual, moral, and intellectual interest, but is in and of itself simply not reliable. It is at the heart of the conflict referred to in the Bible in Galatians, "The flesh lusteth against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that ye cannot do the things that ye would" (5:17).

The consequences of relying on sensual gratification for good in one's life runs right up against the boundaries of physicality, and the good that we hope for is, in the end, almost always denied.

A stark example of this occurred in the life of someone I met a while ago. Forced out of his home at an early age (13), he took to the city streets, making his living, as many street youth do, through prostitution. Unfortunately, the money was all too easy. He developed an addiction first to alcohol and then to a wide array of drugs. His prostitution morphed into sex addiction. Eventually, he developed physical complications, and when we first met, he was suffering from a life-threatening illness.

He was pretty disillusioned with his life. And he'd come to the point of doubting the theory that gratifying the physical senses was as good as it was going to get. He was looking for a new definition of fulfillment and of life itself.

Behind the mask was his wish to be loved, his need to belong. Up to this point in his life, those longings were not being adequately addressed. We began to talk about a different concept of life—a life that came from a spiritual source, from God. We talked about how God so loved His creation that His very nature was expressed in all He created. That expression in-

cludes an abiding sense that one can never be far from the conscious feeling of God's love and care. Often it's when all trust in the physical aspects of life fails or fades away, that deeper spiritual dimensions of existence become more apparent to us. Spiritual sense is required to recognize these inherent spiritual dimensions. Our spiritual sense comes from understanding God—His/Her nature, purposes, and methods. Developing one's spiritual senses requires a shift of focus away from the physical as the dominant interpreter of life, to an awareness of the living presence of God in one's life. The flesh, or physical sense, opposes spiritual sense because they are simply contrary to one another.

*Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, Mary Baker Eddy's defining book on spiritual healing, explains this conflict in a way that helps move us beyond it: "Selfishness and sensualism are educated in mortal mind by the thoughts ever recurring to one's self, by conversation about the body, and by the expectation of perpetual pleasure or pain from it; and this education is at the expense of spiritual growth. If we array thought in mortal vestures, it must lose its immortal nature" (p. 260). Our immortal nature is actually the reality of our experience, the divine nature or qualities of God that He is expressing through us. There is never a moment when this spiritual nature is not present in our lives, but it is so important that we not allow the counterproductive thoughts of sensuality to hold sway in our thinking and draw us away from this fact.

My friend readily related to that sentiment. He'd felt for a very long time that he was constantly thinking of himself as a physical body. And worse yet, he felt others were seeing him only through that physicality. In his words, "I felt more like a piece of meat than a person."

Taking into account so much of today's commercial advertising, we may find it easy to empathize with his feelings. Much of what is projected into human thought is focused on physicality and the expectation of pleasure from it. Yet time and time again, those expectations go unfulfilled. For example, if our love for another person is based on sensuality, when someone comes along with what is perceived to be a more attractive physicality, love is lost. If drugs, illicit or prescriptive, are trusted to provide some degree of euphoria or release, when they wear off or our system becomes used to them, we're still faced with the abiding problem of confinement in a physical concept of who we are. If food is used to comfort emotional pain or insecurity, we soon find these mental disturbances return.

People deserve better than that. My friend realized *he* deserved better than that. He resolved to stop looking at life as

a sensual experience and instead to probe the deeper dimensions of life in and of Spirit. First, that meant seeing himself from a spiritual perspective. So he began to value the qualities and attributes he knew God gave to him, rather than the way he looked physically. He noticed qualities such as intelligence, innocence, strength, and courage developing from within—he was discovering his self-worth as God’s child. He expanded that approach to include appreciation of the spiritual qualities he saw in others, and made a real attempt not to judge some-

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one else’s beauty, worth, or character by physical appearance. He started challenging false assumptions that there was satisfaction to be found in the offers from friends of drugs or sexual encounters, or in the seductive advertisements that seemed to assault him on city buses, newspapers, magazines, and television.

He actually began to enjoy seeing past the shallowness of sensual thinking to spiritual understanding, and found the process enlightening. For the first time, he felt that he was actually thinking for himself and taking charge of his life.

This passage in *Science and Health* meant a lot to him: “Anatomy, when conceived of spiritually, is mental self-knowledge, and consists in the dissection of thoughts to discover their quality, quantity, and origin. Are thoughts divine or human? That is the important question” (p. 462). He found that learning to take possession of his thinking and examine its validity (whether it was spiritually original or physically promotional) was a major step in learning how to control his life.

It wasn’t long before he felt he was looking at life in a different way, drawing on the deeper, more spiritual dimensions of his existence. He felt that God, divine Life, was showing him more and more about who he truly was, and with that development came the healing of the life-threatening disease. This process was not without its ups and downs, as he constantly faced the temptation to resort to prior dependence and prac-

tices. But he had experienced in a very profound way what can happen if one doesn’t challenge sensuality and think about the consequences of indulging in it. He knew firsthand that sensuality was contrary to spiritual development. And perhaps most significant, he was coming to know the disappointments of the one, and the rewards of the other. Today, he says he lives those rewards, feeling dominion in his life and the effects of letting God guide and mold it.

Challenging sensuality (again, the assumption that the highest good comes from gratification of the physical senses) does not mean that one must live an ascetic life, apart from the normal pleasures and activities of everyday experience. What it does imply is that those pleasures be embraced from a higher vantage point. That through sharpening our spiritual senses, we can gain true satisfaction, rather than undermine it. When any activity in life is performed solely because of a physical or sensual enticement—when it’s performed through feeling that the five physical senses demand it—we’ve lost dominion over our experience.

The Bible assures us that “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (II Cor. 3:17). Spiritual understanding always requires that no matter what we do, we recognize God’s control in our lives. From expressing love and affection to another person, to enjoying a day outside in the sun, we can recognize the presence of God right there—and grasp the profound implications of this way of life. These include feeling more freedom, expanding our thought and adventure, and leaving behind the false promises and unfulfilled claims of sensuality. **jc**

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