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Review of Sam Jolman's The Sex Talk You Never Got: Reclaiming the Heart of Masculine Sexuality

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Sam Jolman, a Christian licensed professional counselor in Colorado, offers *The Sex Talk You Never Got* (2024) as a corrective to the deficient or even warped education on sex and sexuality most men received in their formative years. This book offers an alternative to the polarizing narratives regarding sexual arousal and desire, one from a society that propagates licentiousness and sexual objectification, and one from conservative religious communities that focuses on sexual purity. Based on biblical insight and 20-plus years of counseling men, Jolman offers an extensive vision for masculine sexuality that promotes sexual maturation and integration.

He begins by blessing men's sexuality. He asserts that men have neglected and abandoned their sexuality. At a surface level, this may seem self-evidently false, given the saturation of pornography and promiscuity in our culture. But Jolman makes a strong case for how men's authentic sexuality is actually malnourished and uncultivated. Being sexual is not the same as being

sexually mature. To reach sexual maturity, Jolman argues that men's sexuality needs to be mothered (nurtured) and fathered (blessed) so that men will understand that sexuality is underpinned by our capacity for beauty, sensuality, and love.

In the absence of proper sexual formation, men's sexuality becomes malformed. It needs to be acknowledged, healed, and freed. Jolman purports that all men have pushed their sexuality into the shadows to some degree, hence the need to bless one's sexuality. "To bless is to behold something or someone, to tell the story, and to give the good a name . . . a blessing nurtures, grows, shapes, and affirms. It helps some part of you become more fully alive" (p. xxvi).

After this introduction, Jolman declares to the reader that he is fundamentally a lover. We were designed to be moved by beauty. And beauty is deeper than mere appearance. "When we've taken in the *essence* of a thing, then and only then have we beheld its beauty" (p. 4). The capacity to take in the true and full beauty of a person is the

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foundation of sexuality.

To receive beauty in all its fullness, God gifted humanity with senses. We interface with reality through the senses. Society mistakenly equates sensuality with sexuality, but they are distinct. Sexuality emerges from sensuality. The senses are meant for more than survival, but also for delight. The emotional response to beholding beauty is awe.

Jolman helpfully distinguishes arousal from lust: Sexual arousal is a bodily response to stimuli, whereas lust is an act of desire. When arousal and desire differ, there is an arousal non-concordance. Likewise, awe differs from lust. Not all arousal is sexual even. Some bodily arousal is toward awe, which is expansive in that it beholds the fullness of an experience. Conversely, lust narrowly obsesses over specific body parts or fantasies, distorting or reducing one's experience of the other person. Lust stops at the pleasure beauty elicits, but the pleasure beauty stirs in the body is meant to stir the heart to love.

Jolman criticizes our tendency to refer to sex as a drive, making the point that a bodily drive is necessary for survival. Though humanity needs sex to survive into the next generation, no individual person *needs* sex to survive. Therefore, sex is a desire, not a need. The danger in viewing sex as a need is that men treat the sexual urge as one they must answer and are powerless to control. This approach precludes curiosity and puts men in a survival-reaction mode.

A major emphasis in Jolman's book is how sexuality is ultimately about awe. Engaging the world with awe is our path back to innocence. A man's sexuality is meant to propel him to awe and gratitude—ultimately, to worship. Awe is the sense of reverence for the power and transcendence of what one beholds. Quoting from researchers on the phenomenon of awe,

Jolman further describes awe as being on the upper reaches of pleasure and on the boundary of fear. Beauty evokes awe because there is power in beauty. And it inspires men to excel into their full potential.

If sexuality is rooted in awe, which is characteristic of childlike innocence, then sex is meant to be play. "If romance is the adventure of love, then sex is love at play" (p. 58). Like playing a game, sex is the dance of separate teams engaging in mutual enjoyment. Like a play on stage, all sex follows a script. Jolman further defines the qualities of childhood play, which must be re-integrated with sexuality. Play is reverent, freely chosen, requires a proper setting (a playground), and has rules. Play is a mixed neurological state, blending sympathetic nervous system activation with parasympathetic soothing. Play is not just a means to an end; it is the objective of sex itself. Quoting his mentor, Dan Allender: "Love is the giving and receiving of pleasure to the glory of God" (p. 76).

With these definitions established, chapters four, five, and six serve as guides to exploring one's personal story regarding sexuality, particularly how it has gone askew. Sex education is not some lecture about reproduction and sexual morality; it is always an embodied experience of myriad stories forming one's sexuality. "We aren't simply informed but are rather formed in our imagination, our relationship to our bodies, and our view of others" (p. 89). A mature man must be alive in the areas of embodiment, attachment, and sexuality. Unfortunately, precisely because the awe associated with innocent sexuality draws us to worship our Creator, Evil has its own agenda for our sexual formation: to write all your arousal scripts to end in shame and fear. Jolman explores the many ways in which attachment loss, sexual abuse, and other childhood wounds (replete with client case

examples) produce sexual arousal templates that conflict with one's values and virtues.

In the final two chapters, Jolman offers the keys toward sexual maturation and healing—both theological and practical. God wants men to recover the original blessing of innocence and awe for which he's made them. "Anything less than an alive and related heart just won't ever sit well in us. We will always want intimacy, freedom and wholeness, true virility and aliveness. And even when you cannot or will not want it for yourself, even then God will never stop wanting it for you" (p. 165). God desires for us to be unashamed in our nakedness and glory in our vulnerability.

Jolman points to Jesus' demonstration of God's kindness curing our shame. Our instinct is to escape shame through contempt. The alternative is to receive kindness from God and others, and to show kindness to ourselves. This starts with pausing our reactions—quite literally—and breathing, calming down the threat reaction systems in our bodies. Instead of shutting down into a shame state, stay attuned and alive to the body, which requires vulnerability and courage. Staying present to oneself when in a state of arousal is an act of compassion that avoids the pitfalls of pity and self-medicating. This kindness leads to repentance as one shows curiosity about one's sin and follows with self-compassion.

We then need to reawaken and keep awake our capacity to be moved by beauty. This resurrects innocence. Since innocent awe is at the heart of play, cultivating a life of awe develops and matures the lover within oneself. Men must embrace the aroused life, being embodied, regulated, and present. This goes beyond sexuality. In their efforts to combat sexual sin, men have dissociated from sensuality. All of life is sensual, which is the generator of sexuality. Jolman declares, "I'm inviting you to live an aroused life as an act of self-love and self-

nurture. The sex talk you never got left you neglected, exposed, wounded, and yes, immature. It's time you rise to fight for the goodness of your sexual self" (p. 191).

Jolman concludes with casting a vision for how men can heal and protect the whole world when they embrace the masculine call to love. God created men to reflect his image and honor the dignity of each person. God did not create sex to be a tool for power, escape, or irreverence; he created it to be a vehicle for love. When men live and relate with innocence (which is neither ignorance nor pure sinlessness, but awe and wonder), combined with shrewdness, men can confront evil with courage. The lover within, which promotes the good of others, is the engine to write a better story for oneself and the whole of humanity.

Application to Same-Sex Sexuality

The Sex Talk You Never Got is not written specifically to men with same-sex attraction (though he mentions a case vignette of a man whose story played out in compulsive same-sex activity). Nonetheless, I would recommend it as a resource for sexuality strugglers (both men and women) and their loved ones. It is vitally important that those with an unwanted sexual attraction experience—especially if persistent—have a vision for their sexuality greater than the reduction or reversal of their attractions.

Several concepts elucidated in Jolman's book are particularly important for individuals with unwanted same-sex attraction. Firstly, he provides a language for sexual feelings that is sorely needed, especially among those from very strict or fundamentalist religious backgrounds. Sensuality is broader than sexuality. Arousal is broader than sexual arousal. Arousal differs from desire. And arousal and desire are distinct from the sin of lust. In an array of religious cultures, all of these categories

get conflated as sin. This primes one to react to one's sensual arousal and longings with shame, which only inadvertently increases the allure of the associated stimuli. The concept of arousal non-concordance (one's arousal template not aligning with one's desires) could be a welcome idea to sexuality struggler.

Even among those proclaiming an “ex-gay” identity, it is common to observe a pervasive shutdown of sensuality altogether, rather than an embrace of the aroused life. Many of these men continue in quiet desperation, never getting activated as lovers—even if they do enter into a natural (heterosexual) marriage. Their innocence has been buried in shame and they miss out on the keys of curiously learning from their stories, employing self-compassion, and cultivating daily experiences of awe to stir forth their lover within.

As a student of Joseph Nicolosi, the father of reparative therapy, and a practitioner of his son Joseph Nicolosi, Jr's Reintegrative Therapy, I identified numerous parallels between Jolman's approach and the approach of both Nicolosis. Nicolosi Sr's scenario preceding homosexual enactment (Nicolosi, 2016), which I dub the “self-state model,” is echoed perfectly in Jolman's description of awe, innocence, play (all emblematic of the assertion self-state), fear and shame (the double-bind and shame self-state), disconnection from one's expressive emotions (the gray zone self-state), and

contempt-driven sexuality (homosexual enactment self-state). Like Nicolosi, Jolman recognizes problematic sexual arousal templates as being rooted in attachment loss. Similar to Jolman's work, both reparative therapy and Reintegrative Therapy are affect-focused.

Though Jolman primarily received his training from Dan Allender and his story work approach, the emphasis on self-compassion overlaps with the mindful, curious approach we take in Reintegrative Therapy. When in a state of experiencing unwanted sexual arousal, we train clients to respond with nonjudgmental interest and self-regulation, such as through the same deep breathing Jolman describes. Further, in certain Reintegrative protocols, we employ self-compassion as part of trauma memory reprocessing. The resonance is quite encouraging and will hopefully advance acceptance of the work we do with individuals in distress over unwanted same-sex sexual arousal templates and desires.

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