

*How do we understand mystics from all the major religious traditions who describe the height of spiritual communion as orgasmic? How does our physiological, cognitive, and psycho-social maturation affect our ability to experience profound emotional and sexual intimacy?  
Could deeper joys still await us?*

## HOW SEX AND SPIRIT ARE LINKED A DEVELOPMENTAL PERSPECTIVE

*By Marybeth Raynes*

Love is anterior to life  
Posterior to death  
Initial of creation  
The exponent of breath  
—Emily Dickinson<sup>1</sup>

SEX AND SPIRIT ARE LINKED THROUGH LOVE, their common denominator. They are supported by a common trunk, like the branches of a tree or the limbs of our bodies. As Emily Dickinson and many others believe, love is inherent within all of experience, through all of our existence. Although others may assert that atoms or subatomic particles are the underlying feature of all that is, there is much more.<sup>2</sup> As we grow into the full flowering of maturity and beyond into the highest reaches of human consciousness, love is the direct experience we express most often.

Since love, or the lack of it, is connected in some way to all experience, why focus on the relationship between spirituality and sexuality? Indeed, many qualities of existence offer joyfulness and meaning: music, nature, learning, or physical activity. All of these and more may rightly be deemed “spiritual” because they increase the meaningfulness of the life we live and reflect upon it. These increase our “spiritedness,” or our awareness of the dimensions beyond mere physical well-being. And the best forms of these activities enlarge us beyond the boundaries of our own egos to genuine sharing with others. These

experiences could be spiritual experiences because they fit Paul Tillich’s definition that spirituality is our avenue of “ultimate concern.”<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, many subjects and experiences might be termed sexual or “erotic.” Audre Lorde’s definition includes the sexual but expands beyond it:

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference. Another important way in which the erotic connection functions is the open and fearless underlining of my capacity for joy. In the way my body stretches to music and opens into response, hearkening to its deepest rhythms, so every level upon which I sense also opens to the erotically satisfying experience, whether it is dancing, building a bookcase, writing a poem, examining an idea.<sup>4</sup>

We often spontaneously experience awareness of both eros and spirit at the same time, even if the activity is intended to be only one or the other. Additionally, for many of us, these two areas of experience are often those that carry the greatest emotional intensity. In these aspects of our humanity, we find the heights of joy and depths of meaning. Indeed, mystics from the world’s great religions frequently describe the height of communion with God or Spirit as orgasmic.<sup>5</sup>

Despite spontaneous occurrences of spirit and sex together, we see each as fundamentally different during our early stages of development. Although they seem unrelated for many years of our lives, we shall see that at later stages, they become inseparable. Also, as we shall see, both spirituality and sexuality



MARYBETH RAYNES is a clinical social worker and marriage and family therapist in private practice in Salt Lake City. She also teaches in the Graduate School of Social Work, University of Utah. A version of this article was given at the

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can only reach their mature forms through learning and practicing love in relationship to others, as well as within ourselves. Both can be experienced and expressed only in how we treat ourselves and others. To engage in either, I believe we must consider both. How this dynamic interplay occurs is the focus of this paper.

**A**T EVERY STAGE of life, even when we are young children, both spirituality and sexuality are modeled, taught, and lived out in relationship to others. For example, the core of any moral code defines actions in relation to God and/or others. Likewise, the physical or mental expression or inhibition of our sexual feelings can occur in only two ways: in outward relationship with others or with images or impulses within ourselves.

Interestingly, although we have often recited that we must love ourselves before we can love other, the opposite may be true. Mark Epstein, a psychotherapist, maintains that our preoccupation with building our finite, limited self often keeps us from happiness. He asserts that “you don’t have to be happy before you can love someone else. On the contrary, you have to be able to love another person before you can feel good about yourself.”<sup>6</sup> Or, is there really a chicken and egg dynamic between loving others and loving ourselves? I believe that since both are important, and each depends upon the other, we cannot decide which comes first. Instead, my best guess is that loving ourselves and others is learned in a long apprenticeship of reciprocal actions, much as an intricate dance requires both the separate and combined learning of each limb, each body, and each partner in an ever increasingly complex duet.

This same dynamic is true even when we are alone. We cannot have *any* experience that is not a relationship in some form. Consider a man who has decided one fine Saturday morning to fix his old truck in the driveway. He gets up before everyone else, eats breakfast alone, pulls all the necessary parts and tools from his workshop, goes out to his truck, and then spends the entire morning working on the carburetor. He sees no one, talks to no one. How is he in relationship to others?

Our man in the driveway has been trained by others and has internalized their instructions. Although he may not be aware of it, he is silently moving through the motions of ma-

nipulating his tools and engine parts, coaching himself much as he had been coached. The relationships that were once external are now within him, returning to his consciousness as sentences, images of past memories, or even body sensations and impulses to stop, proceed, or tighten the screw. Relationships persist, even if only within ourselves. If the early teaching in his life or auto mechanics class has been fairly positive, he probably had a fine time as he guided himself throughout the morning. However, if he had been criti-

cized or had received anxious or threatening coaching, then he may have experienced tension between himself and his inner coach. He may have externalized this past relationship as hostility toward his truck, for we often anthropomorphize our relationships with our favorite objects: cars, houses, land, toys. In fact, it is difficult to see how *any* internal activity is not relational.

In addition to external relationships, as we grow, we create complex and various facets of ourselves. These sub-selves develop and exist in relationship to each other.<sup>7</sup> One of our most important discoveries as we mature is that we cannot be kind to one facet of the self, yet scathing to others, and still grow.

## DEVELOPMENTAL PRINCIPLES AND STAGES

**B**EYOND THESE FAIRLY straightforward linkages between the external world and our internal lives, our understanding of ourselves grows delightfully richer if we consider the developmental stages of growth from infancy to the most mature levels of human flourishing. Various facets of life, such as mental or social competence, form a dense network of connections which become increasingly interwoven as we grow. These facets then become connected to still other lines of development.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, several important aspects must connect if we are to achieve higher stages of growth. Much like a singer working to achieve mastery who must develop several skills interdependently—the physical capacity for strong breath and trained vocals, the mental capacity to learn first notes then melodies in sequence and harmony, the social and emotional capabilities to sing to and connect deeply with others, and so on—we too progress in stages, with each succeeding stage adding elements to our repertoire.

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Both spiritual and sexual growth depend on many other lines of development—physical, mental, social, and emotional. In the discussion that follows, I will provide an overview of the “dance” of that development. We will see that spirit and eros are far apart at some stages, integrated at others, and, in the large view, are isomorphic—their underlying developmental patterns are structurally similar.

In this essay, I use two structures. The first is a set of *principles of growth* by which we can interpret the various facets of development at each stage. The second framework is the *stages of human development* from birth to the most highly developed levels of consciousness. The relationship between the two is analogous to our own bodies: stages constitute the skeleton, while principles are the ligaments and muscles secured to the skeleton. Both bones and muscles are necessary to the other, both must be strong, but they must be strong in different ways to permit maximum functioning.

THE FIRST CONCEPTUAL structure, “A Few Orienting Principles of Development” (Table 1), assembled from various developmental theorists, is crucial because these principles apply to every stage of life and

### A FEW ORIENTING PRINCIPLES OF DEVELOPMENT

1. *Development unfolds in predictable, sequential stages.*
2. *We cannot skip stages.*
3. *Each stage builds on the previous stages.*
4. *Each stage transcends and enfolds the previous stage.*
5. *We are primarily in one stage at one time, but we can have experiences from several other stages at any time.*
6. *We require a system, or vehicle, to travel through all of the stages. This system is commonly called the “ego” or the “self.”*
7. *Growth in the brain must occur before and during growth in other areas.*
8. *Throughout every stage, all growth and experiences occur within the body.*

\*Table 1

hold true in every facet of life—whether intellectual, physical, emotional, social, spiritual, or sexual.<sup>9</sup> This list is by no means comprehensive, but the principles are, I hope, enough to help make sense of the stages themselves when we discuss them below.

Before you read further, it might be helpful to glance over both Tables 1 and 2 (below and page 50). Grasping the main principles of growth will make what follows more understandable and will help illustrate the necessity of using these principles in tandem with stage theory.

### DEVELOPMENTAL PRINCIPLES

1. DEVELOPMENT UNFOLDS IN PREDICTABLE, SEQUENTIAL STAGES. The stages of psychological, social, moral, and sexual development are often pictured as a ladder, with each rung higher than the other. In this model, once we climb to a new level, we leave all previous rungs behind. Unfortunately, because of its hierarchical and exclusivist implications, this concept of the ladder does not adequately capture the realities of the growth process. For me, a much better image is a collapsible drinking cup, the kind you find in camping kits. When collapsed, it looks like a set of concentric circles, but as we pull it up, the rings rise one above the other, forming a well that is narrow at the bottom, but that becomes progressively wider as it goes up. Our growth is like this cup; each stage builds upon the previous stage, which remains embedded or encapsulated within in it.

Like the small central circle, when we are born, our abilities to understand and function in life are very limited, yet all of the outer rings, each a discrete developmental stage, are potential competencies and levels of awareness embedded in us, ready and waiting, if all goes well, to emerge later.

2. WE CANNOT SKIP STAGES. Even though the capacities and types of experience characteristic of outer, or more advanced, stages may look more attractive to us, we cannot concentrate on acquiring the capacities of those stages while ignoring intervening developmental tasks. We have to learn to speak before we can sing or tell a joke, walk before we dance or play ball, add before we can multiply. Similarly, we must clearly grasp our concrete, three-dimensional world before we can comprehend more abstract realms, learn to follow strict rules of fairness before we can adequately develop the generosity to incline them in the direction of our neighbor, and develop empathy for ourselves and others before we can truly love.

3. EACH STAGE BUILDS ON PREVIOUS STAGES. Like our drinking cup, each ring increases our capacity as it unfolds. With each stage, we grow in every area of development from the previous stage. We add capacities exponentially. The result is an ability for greater depth and breadth of experience than we had at any previous stage.

If, however, for whatever reason, an area of our life becomes stunted, we will experience little growth in that domain from that point forward. For example, if someone is intellectually

gifted but physically disabled, lacks opportunities to develop physical skills, or is disinterested in physical activities, she or he can continue to develop their intellectual gifts even though, physically speaking, they remain severely stunted. Physicist Stephen Hawking may be one of the most inspirational examples of someone who has built upon on his intellectual strengths while remaining cruelly limited in the physical domain. Most of us have areas of development that far outpace other areas.

This ability to compartmentalize and compensate is not true, however, in the realm of psychosocial (or spiritual/sexual) development. Development in both the psychological and social realms must synchronize with each other or either area risks being stunted. When thinking about moral and social development, it may be useful to think of a three-legged race. Each area is a separate developmental line—each with its own “independent” leg of individuality—but the other limb is interdependently

bound to a partner, joined in a common concern of connection to others. In each area, we must learn to consider both others *and* ourselves to reach genuine maturity. That is why both are necessary precursors to higher levels of spiritual and sexual development. At mature stages, we must associate reciprocally with others to reach our full potential. Our sense of identity must increasingly move beyond our discrete selves to a broader perceptual grasp of our deep interconnectedness and ways we are all alike or, in Christian terms, how all of us are part of the body of Christ.

4. EACH STAGE TRANSCENDS AND ENFOLDS THE PREVIOUS STAGES. The dictionary definition of *transcend* means “to pass beyond the limits of, to be greater than, to exist above and independent,” while *enfold* means “to envelop, to hold within limits; enclose, embrace.”<sup>10</sup> For my purposes, the usual definition of *enfold* works well, but that of *transcend* does not, so I am borrowing Ken Wilber’s definition. To transcend is to grow in acquiring new capacities in ways that integrate and include whatever is expandable from all previous stages. It *does not* mean to discard previously developed capacities nor to find them irrelevant.<sup>11</sup> For instance, most of us learned to crawl before moving on to walking and running. However, crawling

still remains in our repertoires; and we use it when, for example, the plumbing under the house needs tending to or a small child wants to play bears.

As part of transcendence at each stage, we gain a fundamentally different view of the world than we had at previous stages. Santa Claus was real for us at one point in our lives, a myth at another, and later a story to illustrate the principle of generous giving. Similarly, *every* facet of life looks remarkably different at every stage (see Table 2). Each new stage brings a new understanding and explanation of reality. It is as if we are severely myopic (indeed, we are), but then at every new stage,

we gradually acquire a new set of lenses that allows us to see both nearer and farther, with more detail and from more angles, than at previous stages.

Until later stages (Stage 6 and beyond), we tend to trivialize, negate, and fight against the ideas, perspectives, and ways of being of both previous *and* future stages.<sup>12</sup> In this natural but immature defensiveness, we insist that there is no difference between

reality and our individual perspective, that what we are seeing is all that can be seen, and no other vision is valid. In the later stages, we not only see many other perspectives but can also grasp how they are all valid and useful in some ways. Setting about to integrate multiple perspectives becomes both an appealing and rewarding task.

It might be helpful to think of the earliest stages (the “pre-personal” stages, Stages 1 through 3) as seeing the world through a telescope (though perhaps without much magnifying power). As we move into a more advanced stage (Stage 4), we switch to binoculars—two coordinated lenses that allow us to see three dimensions. Then (at Stage 5), we add the ability to tinker with a zoom lens so that increasingly distant or fuzzy views come into focus. Later (at Stage 6), we add sub-lenses by which we are able to simultaneously view several objects at once—perhaps with an ability borrowed from the kaleidoscope—to observe *interlocking patterns* and how each small rotation alters each previous view.

5. WE ARE PRIMARILY IN ONE STAGE AT A TIME, BUT WE CAN HAVE EXPERIENCES FROM SEVERAL OTHER STAGES AT ANY TIME. Because we are very complex personalities, we can and do experience feelings, ideas, and actions from almost every

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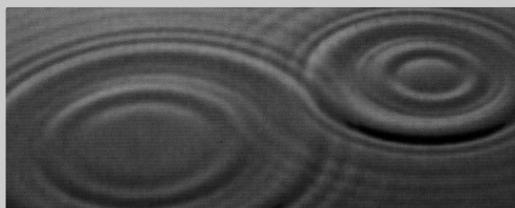
**that allows us to see both nearer and farther, with more detail, and from more angles, than at previous stages.**

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## Underpinnings of Spiritual and Sexual Development

Marybeth Raynes

	Stage (Wilber/Wade)	Age	Brain Functions (Wade)	Level of Thinking (Piaget)
Prepersonal Stages	1. Archaic/Reactive	0–2	Reptilian-Complex, Sensorimotor awareness	Sign: sign recognition only
	2. Magic/Naive	2–4	Reptilian-Complex plus Limbic	Symbols: pre-operational thinking
	3. Egocentric	4–7	Limbic system	Symbols: pre-operational thinking
Personal Stages	4. Mythic-Membership/Conformist	7–17?	Limbic system	Concepts: late formal operational. Dichotomizing rule/role mind.
	5. Rational/Achievement or Affiliative	17–adult	Limbic system + neocortex	Dialectical: abstract thinking with the ability to see two perspectives simultaneously.
	6. Vision-Logic/Authentic	Middle–late adult	Neocortex with coordination of right-left hemispheres	Synthetic: ability to see multiple systems/networks simultaneously
Transpersonal Stages	7. Psychic/Transcendent	Middle–late adult (rare)	Neocortex, plus coordination with other brain systems	Synchronistic: synthetic plus intuitive, emergent thought
	8. Subtle/Transcendent	Late adult (rare)	Neocortex coordination plus increasing control of lower brain	Stage 7 plus more numinous paranormal experience with all previous cognitive abilities intact
	9. Causal/Unity	Late adult (rare)	Stage 8 plus control over lower brain	Stages 7–8 plus all forms of consciousness



\*Table 2

stage. For instance, we find ourselves reverting to less-mature behavior when we become frightened or anxious. At other times, we have remarkable experiences that temporarily lift us far beyond our usual level of generosity, sensitivity, or patience. Indeed, our “peak” experiences are very often “peek” moments which flash us a vision of how we may yet develop.<sup>13</sup>

Still, most of us primarily live at one particular stage at a time in which our worldview and everyday actions create a coherent reality. However, when we are moving from one stage to another, we are really occupying two places at once. We have one foot in each stage, rocking back and forth, unable to step firmly across the threshold into the new stage, yet unable to settle back into the too-familiar comforts and problems of the previous stage. A second exception to the one-stage-at-a-time mode can occur when we have a significant split between two or more facets of ourselves—with the separated parts in different stages. For example, “my heart tells me one thing, but my head tells me another.” In our culture, splits between the spiritual and the sexual are common.

6. WE REQUIRE A CONCEPTUAL SYSTEM, OR VEHICLE, IN WHICH TO TRAVEL THROUGH ALL OF THE STAGES. THIS SYSTEM IS COMMONLY CALLED THE “EGO” OR THE “SELF” Just as we need a car, bus, or plane to travel geographical distances or language to convey concepts, we require an inner system to move us through life. Without it, we would remain infants in understanding and capabilities. Although the term “ego” is often misunderstood as referring to that part of ourselves that contains only our self-gratifying desires, thereby causing us to ignore or harm others, this is a very limited view. Indeed, ego is better understood as a unifying system, that sense of self, or self-concept, that coordinates all of the facets of our emerging consciousness. It directs our development in all areas: intellectual, social, sexual, emotional, physical, moral, musical, spiritual, and so forth. It also regulates impulses, tests reality, balances our inner with our outer experiences, and integrates each aspect of ourselves and each stage of growth with every other. These are enormous tasks, and until we reach the more

mature stages, our ego performs these functions unconsciously and not always very well.<sup>14</sup>

In our earliest developmental periods (Stages 1 through 3), we do not have a stable sense of self and are indeed very egocentric. These stages, usually occurring from 0–7 years of age, are labeled “prepersonal” or “prerational,” because we do not yet have the capacity to use reason and feeling<sup>15</sup> to include others’ rights or views into our own worldview and still maintain our sense of self. In these prepersonal stages, we are

either fused with others, or alone and alienated, often in quick succession. If as adults, we remain stuck at these stages—or if we are thrown back to these stages by a disappointment or trauma—we might rightly call the ego “petty” in some circumstances.

During the stages that follow, we acquire enough rational and emotional capacity (and hence sufficient social and moral sense), to develop a stable sense of our own self in an interwoven community of others. This is why

these have been labeled as “personal” or “rational” stages. We become capable of “autonomy-in-connection.”<sup>16</sup> During the first of these stages (Stage 4), we approach, and then at the next (Stage 5), we reach, “the continental divide of development.” This is the point at which we truly acquire the capacity to consider and/or care for another, independent of but connected to our capacity to care for ourself. Before this achievement, we see every facet of the self as operating independently—as compartmentalized or split off from other facets of the self. Sex and spirit are opposed or merely unrelated. From here on, we understand that every facet relates to every other. Spirituality, sexuality, ideas, social action—all relate, debate, dialogue, and form ongoing “discussions” with each other. With each successive stage, we come to enjoy an even deeper integration and collaboration between all the facets of our self, other selves, and the larger “Self” or God. In these stages, our sense of self is our identity: we are a member of a tribe, church, or sports team (Stage 4); we are an individual who values the thoughts and actions of other individuals (Stage 5); we are a citizen of the world who sees universal similarities and connections among all humans (Stage 6).

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**Spirit can enter into  
our lives according  
to the capacities  
we have to receive  
and use it. Developing  
our whole selves  
also increases  
our abilities to develop spiritually,  
however we might experience  
that growth or whatever terms  
we may use to express it.**

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Nine Stages of Spiritual and Sexual Development  
Marybeth Raynes

Stage (Wilber/Wade)	Age/est. % of adults who "max" at that stage <sup>17</sup>	Self/Social (Maslow)  <i>Ability to Love</i> a. Self development b. View of self, other	Moral (Kohlberg/Gilligan)  <i>Ethical motive</i>	Spiritual (Fowler)  <i>View of spirit</i>	Sexual (Wilber, Raynes)  <i>View of sexuality</i>	
Prepersonal Stages	1. Archaic/ Reactive	0-2 yrs./ 0.1%	a. Safety b. Own body self/others have own body self	None	Undifferentiated	Pleasurable sensation within body-self, no concepts
	2. Magic/Naive	2-4 yrs./ 10%	a. Safety b. Own/other emotional-self	Magic wish	Intuitive- projective	Sensations in body, genitals, feelings, sex actions good or bad
	3. Egocentric	4-7 yrs./ 20%	a. Safety b. Own/other mind-self	Punish or obey, hedonism/selfish	Mythic-literal	Same as #2 plus thoughts seen as good or bad, mind-body split
Personal Stages	4. Mythic- Membership/ Conformist	7-17 yrs./ 40%	a. Belongingness b. Own/other group or social self	Law and order, approval, regulated fairness/care	Synthetic- conventional	Body, genitals, actions, thoughts are good if one follows rules, bad if not
	5. Rational/ Achievement or Affiliative	17 yrs.- adult/ 30%	a. Self-esteem b. Own/other personal self	Individual rights, fairness for self and others/universal care	Individuative- reflexive	Sexuality as aspect of personality. Own rules plus societal rules guide feelings, actions
	6. Vision- Logic/ Authentic	Middle- late adult/ 10%	a. Self-actualization b. World-centric self among selves	Individual and interper- sonal principles of conscience/integrative	Conjunctive (synthesis of all views, faiths)	Own and others' sexu- ality are good, joyous with principled action
Transpersonal Stages	7. Psychic/ Transcendent	Middle- late adult/ (rare)	a. Self-transcendence b. Spiritual-centric self	Universal-spiritual principles	Universalizing	Sexuality, spirituality (as aspects of self) are part of the whole or God; all consciousness
	8. Subtle/ Transcendent	Late adult/ (rare)	a. Same as #7 b. Self-integrated	Same as #7	Same as #7	All aspects, actions of self-others known as reflections of God; all consciousness
	9. Causal/Unity	Late adult/ (rare)	a. Same as #7 b. Self-self with God, "All that is"	Same as #7	Same as #7	Same as #8. All is direct, non-dual experience in all of life

\*Table 3

## DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

If we continue to grow into even later stages of development, often called “transpersonal” or “transrational” (Stages 7 through 9), our self-system expands beyond just “this world” experience. We can have spiritual experiences at any stage, but in these transpersonal stages, we transcend our perception of our self as separate, even while we retain an awareness that we have, in fact, individual bodies and minds. As with all stages before them, these stages integrate and include all the previous stages, yet go beyond them. We become transrational—that is, we acquire the ability to perceive ourselves as fully part of all other realities, while still retaining an understanding of separateness. Our thinking becomes more refined. At this stage, we see ourselves as one facet of God, as part of all that is in the whole field of consciousness, and as part of “the invisible world that supports the visible.”<sup>18</sup>

7. GROWTH IN THE BRAIN MUST OCCUR BEFORE AND DURING GROWTH IN OTHER AREAS. We cannot achieve mature soul/spirit growth without increased neurological capacity. That is, we cannot develop in certain ways if certain neurological functions are hampered. For example, anyone who interacts with a Down syndrome child experiences something truly sublime in terms of pure, spontaneous, nonjudgmental, and wholehearted affection. In terms of loving, a Down child is literally hardwired to love. But because of a genetic structure that creates neurological limitations, this same loving child sometimes cannot easily discriminate between people who are worthy or even safe to lavish affection on and those who are not. They cannot show stable love by self-sacrifice or respond with love that sensitively matches the capacity and needs of the recipient of their love.

In contrast, a child without the genetic limitations of Down syndrome may lack the capacity for spontaneous affection and seem much more selfish in earlier stages of development, but as neurological development continues in its normal trajectory, opportunities for learning in emotional, moral, intellectual, and other developmental lines open up. As in all other biological growth, there must be a underlying physiological structure to support growth in other areas, even if these areas are known only through behavior and subjective experience. The brain increases the use and coordination of its various parts at each new stage of maturity. See Table 2, “Underpinnings of Spiritual and Sexual Development” (page 50) for essential basic brain development and cognitive abilities.

8. THROUGHOUT EVERY STAGE, ALL GROWTH EXPERIENCES OCCUR WITHIN THE BODY. Despite the traditional privileging of mind over body in Western culture, we exist in, through, and of our bodies. Our experience occurs through the physical web of brain, eyes, muscles, stomach, and feet, as well as nerves, arteries, and heart. In the earlier stages of development, we believe that sex, spirit, and others are outside of us and beyond us. Progression through the various stages means we increasingly know with our senses as well as with our minds that we *are* our bodies as well as our spirits.

THESE EIGHT PRINCIPLES constitute the first framework by which to understand development; the second set of concepts is the nine stages of growth. (See Table 3, “Nine Stages of Spiritual and Sexual Development,” page 52)

There are three major stages, each with three substages. In the earlier discussion of the sixth principle of growth, I briefly described the major stages—prepersonal, personal, and transpersonal. The three substages, though subordinate, are anything but insignificant, as each represents enormous gains in capacity for experiential breadth and depth.

In Table 3, the column headings list the developmental areas identified by major psychological theorists Abraham Maslow,<sup>19</sup> Lawrence Kohlberg,<sup>20</sup> Carol Gilligan,<sup>21</sup> James Fowler,<sup>22</sup> and my own thinking with input from Ken Wilber. I will briefly sketch the major thrust of each theorist in the discussion of the various stages that follows, but interested readers should refer directly to their major works for a much more thorough explanation. My focus is not to summarize their words but rather to communicate a sense of how (from their combined perspectives) a person functions at each stage.

The two subheadings under the category “Ability to Love” in the Self/Social column indicate that both self-development and a view of others are necessary before moral development can occur. Both are also vital building blocks for sexual and spiritual development. When we have sexual experiences, or spiritual ones, we cannot make sense of them, remember them, or use them in our lives without having engaged in self-development or in having a view of ourselves in relation to others. Again, the ability to love is the common trunk from which the branches of our spiritual and sexual growth emerge.

Table 3 builds on two other lines of development that are necessary for self and moral development: (1) levels of brain development, and (2) stages of cognitive capabilities (shown in Table 2). As indicated in our earlier discussion (of principle 7), neurological development beyond a current stage is required for any other kind of growth into the next stage. Furthermore, all growth at each stage occurs in what may be a lock-step sequence: brain development, followed by cognitive development, then self development, and then moral development. If a person does not achieve a stage in this sequence, he or she cannot move on to the next level, including in the areas of spiritual and sexual development.

I give two names for each of the nine stages in order to give credit to both Wilber and Wade, and also because I consider that both together give a clearer image than either alone of the characteristics of each stage. The first name for each stage is Wilber’s (e.g., “Archaic”), while the second is Wade’s, preceded by a slash (e.g., “/Reactive”). The one exception to this is Stage 3, which both name “Egocentric.”

The nine stages we will discuss integrate the customary six stages of growth<sup>23</sup> developed in similar ways by many person-

ality theorists over the last century, but then add three more at the upper reaches of development. The two primary theorists I draw on for this paper, Ken Wilber<sup>24</sup> and Jenny Wade,<sup>25</sup> have identified these final three stages from their work with various religious texts and practices. Both Wilber and Wade are integrative thinkers working in a relatively new field of inquiry—transpersonal psychology—which seeks to link insights and research from psychology over the last century with the world's major religious and mystical traditions. Although they write independently, each is aware of the other's work. Their models are very similar and reflect basically the same stages of growth. Both are aiming at the equivalent of a unified field theory of the stages of consciousness—principles that produce a map of the stages of consciousness that is true for all of us in every culture and throughout time. I suggest interested readers first consult Wilber's *A Brief History of Everything*, and then Wade's much denser, but immensely rewarding, *Changes of Mind*.

#### FOUR DEVELOPMENTAL AREAS

*Self and Social Development.* Our thoughts, feelings, and actions regarding ourselves and others must grow into the basic skills necessary to negotiate life and to learn to love. Indeed, love is more than just a feeling; it is an art. Our ability to give and receive love consists of a set of mental, emotional, and social skills that grow exponentially as we grasp important concepts and marry them with warm expressions in our actions. Those who are at less-developed stages may love fully within their capacities, much as small children love their mother; but those with more developed and skilled minds and hearts can love more fully, like the mother who can maintain a constancy of caring through the ups and downs of her children's moods, achievements, and mishaps.

At the most mature stages, our loving is characterized not only by greater depth of feeling and awareness, but our actions are also guided by greater wisdom. We learn more and more to express caring that is much less attached to our own private or competitive concerns.

*Moral Development.* During the prepersonal stages, we are really not capable of moral action. We follow commands, we learn rules, we are rewarded or punished, but we do not have the capacity to internalize the ethical principles that underlie the rules. But at about age seven or eight—a period that will resonate with Mormon readers as the “age of accountability”—the capacity emerges to understand rules, identify what truly is or is not “fair,” and imagine how another person feels. At this stage, we can understand, make, and keep agreements. During the three personal stages (Stages 4 through 6), we develop this capacity to consider ourselves and others in connection. By the time we are fully mature, or self-actualized (Stage 6), we can simultaneously consider many points of view and a wide spectrum of alternatives for action. Further on, as we enter the transpersonal stages, we automatically consider others as we

reflect on options and take action.

This capacity to universalize our concerns and include all others within our moral decision-making is supported in religious literature. For example, according to scripture, both the Apostle John and the “Three Nephites” expressed a desire to remain alive ministering unto all the people of the earth until Christ's second coming. In Mahayana Buddhism, those seeking the enlightenment path take the vows of a Bodhisattva, a promise to continue to reincarnate and help others until *all* become enlightened. In short, most religious traditions hold up as important models of moral growth, those whose hearts and actions are oriented to the larger world, and less and less primarily to their own finite selves.

*Spiritual Development.* Spirituality grows in stages and is dependent upon both psycho-social and moral development. The labels in the spiritual development column of Table 3 (“undifferentiated,” “intuitive-projective,” “mythic-literal,” etc.) belong to James Fowler and are drawn from his important work, *Stages of Faith*. It is helpful to compare his labels with the ideas in the Self/Social and Moral development columns to gain a sense of how their cognitive and behavioral capacities coordinate with each other and create the groundwork necessary for each level of spiritual growth.

Essentially, the core idea is that spirit (whether Spirit, or spiritual realities) can enter into our lives only according to the capacities we have to receive and use it. Developing our whole selves also increases our abilities to develop spiritually, however we might experience that growth or whatever terms we may use to express it. Although these uses and expressions are highly varied throughout the world, they must all function within the capabilities determined by the level of our minds and hearts, and the size of our moral embrace.

*Sexual Development.* The stages of sexual development are my own contribution and follow closely the cognitive, social, and moral capabilities already outlined. During my research on sexual development, I found many sources that listed stages. Frustratingly, they were limited in crucial ways. Most considered only the development of physical capacities (important to be sure!) and the events/behaviors that unfolded at turning points in the life cycle; but they gave only minor consideration to the inner development needed for growth in this area. I crafted my summary statements by gleaning from many sources. I intend my descriptions as suggestions, not prescriptions, and welcome further insights.

Mature sexual and spiritual development requires advanced moral development, self-actualization and a wide capacity to love, and mature cognitive and emotional skills. Without advancement in all of these areas, no matter how delightful, exciting, meaningful, or connected we feel—our sexual experiences will remain partial, temporary, and at times conflicted. If we will continue to grow, we will come to experience greater depths of joy, connectedness, and ecstasy that we didn't imagine possible.

## HOW SEX AND SPIRIT GROW

**T**HROUGHOUT THIS ARTICLE, I have argued that every aspect of development has a physiological as well as psychological component. Because physiological development is quantifiable, many studies focus on what happens in our bodies. These states can be studied externally and results charted. External states lend themselves much more easily to categorization and description than do internal states of being. To try to present an internal as well as external view of how sex and spirit grow, I will briefly discuss each stage in analytic terms but will follow (in discussions of Stages 3 and beyond) the descriptions with love poems that illustrate an “inside” dimension of each stage. The poems dealing with sexual love are not sexually explicit because I want to illustrate breadth and depth of feeling and how God and/or a lover is conceptualized, rather than focus on physiological functioning.

**STAGE 1: ARCHAIC/REACTIVE.** From birth to about age two, human personality consists primarily of physical sensations, an amazing growth of language, and a blossoming sense of our own body and the world around us. Our brain functions only with what has been labeled the “reptilian complex” (R-Complex), the systems that control our autonomic nervous system (respiration, circulation, digestion, etc.) and other very basic survival mechanisms. Even though our cognitive and language skills are still very limited, we come to understand certain signs, “yes/no,” and simple sentences (“Where’s Daddy?” “Do you want some milk?”). However, we have the beginnings of self image and only a limited sense of others. Hence, no moral development is present or possible. We may have sexual and spiritual experiences, but our memory system and ego are not sufficiently developed to maintain our awareness of them. Even instances of brilliance that parents and others may interpret as wisdom or deep understanding are flashes that cannot be maintained, duplicated, nor yet consciously built upon.

**STAGE 2: MAGIC/NAIVE.** In this stage, typically experienced from ages two to four, we start to differentiate between ourselves and others, and we learn others have their own feelings. We develop the capacity to control our bodies and to repeat pleasurable movements and sensations. Despite our vague efforts to create pleasure or avoid pain, however, the stimuli for both appear to be outside ourselves, not primarily generated by internal impulses. They are not directed by our own sense of self, for no cohesive “self” has yet developed.

We learn to move from signs to symbols, for we gain the capacity to understand that one thing can stand for another, even if we don’t see it. We learn spiritual songs, words, gestures, and prayers. But our worldview is magical: Someone out there creates everything that happens. Feelings come and go away. They happen to us; they are not in us, or part of us. God or a

magical force makes things happen—God is happy with me, God is mad at me.

Our language is still limited, so our linguistic expressions of sexual feelings would, at best, be chants and limericks—the *body* and the *bawdy* are one. Spiritual expression is similar. Our prayers are short, repeated phrases intended to produce an immediate, practical effect. Since we cannot yet tell time, everything is immediate. Almost always our pleas are urgent, and the results are unambiguous: We either get what we want immediately, or we don’t.

**STAGE 3: EGOCENTRIC.** From ages four to seven, we learn that we have not only our own body and emotions that are separate yet connected to others, but we also have our own minds, thoughts, and wishes. And they are all focused on us. The limbic system, which controls emotions, is fully developed. This emotional center delivers up intense feelings, which we can easily confuse with external realities, with other people’s feelings, or even truth. Yet at this stage, our thinking skills allow us only to formulate simple concepts, and we cannot yet truly discriminate between right and wrong. Authority figures train us to observe such codes of behavior as sharing, but the behavior easily disappears when the authority leaves the room. Any wish for the well-being of others or any help we extend to others is a behavior that we have learned and repeated. We do not yet have the moral maturity to behave in a loving or ethical way. If an action would conflict with our own wishes, we would not perform it.

As we gain a rudimentary sense of time and the ability to form more abstract concepts, we learn that there is a world beyond signs and symbols. We do not need to see God to believe. We believe because others we trust believe. Because we are children, our view of God is modeled on our own parents. If we are fortunate, our parents—and hence our view of God—are benevolent; but we can all supply examples of God-images that are arbitrary and punitive. In either case, our relationship with God is simple: He rewards us when we are good and punishes us when we are bad. We and others are good or bad. Actions are clearly good or bad, not ambiguous. Our world is black and white.

Some people retain this view of their spiritual life even when they are adults. And, at times, even someone at the egocentric stage of development can experience a compelling peaceful or beatific vision of how the world can become one or happy. Thus enlightened, this person may feel enormously motivated to live in that vision and to attempt to reproduce it for others. He may even preach, set up social structures such as ministries and foundations, and labor sincerely to convert others to his vision. However, this person has not gone through the stages of moral and social development necessary for him to consider others’ rights and needs as equal to his own and also to recognize that each person has his or her own worldview that might be just as compelling. This enlightened one may become so convinced that *his* view is the whole view that he ignores others’ rights, behaves irresponsibly in terms of

managing his own affairs, or becomes enmeshed in conflict with others. Such a person may remain isolated, eventually becoming bitter or disheartened. Even his vision loses its power to bring peace and communion with the divine. Equally possible, if he is able to win adherents to his views, he may feel justified in limiting the rights of others, or schisms will develop as those converts exercise their own agency. Many small groups which quickly begin to operate as “closed” societies—sometimes unified by drastic predictions of the ending of the world—are led by persons at this developmental level. And in truth, many at this stage also fit, more or less marginally, in a larger church organization which may take a wider attitude.

When we are in this stage, we organize our sexual impulses and actions around our immediate needs. We do not yet have good impulse control. The predominant reasons we stay in our seats, keep our clothes on, or take daily baths are fear of punishment and the hope for reward. Still, when grown-ups or a larger authority figure, such as the police, are not around, impulses frequently overpower the rewards/punishments system. Should we remain in this stage into adulthood, as many do, we will easily get into sexual, moral, or social trouble because we have no governing vision, no developed moral ideas that might help us control our impulses.

During the egocentric stage, sex and spirit have little or no relationship to each other in a person’s consciousness. Sexuality and spirituality occur in different parts of the self. Indeed, if we are taught (as is often the case) that one is good and the other bad, this split may endure into maturity, hindering our later development.

The following poem illustrating how things seem at this level of development, “Children of Our Heavenly Father,” communicates a desire for safety—the wish that everything will be all right. (Although this poem, and the next one, “I Want You,” give an “inside” view of this stage, it would be unusual for a person at the egocentric level of development to be able to write with this much complexity.)

#### CHILDREN OF OUR HEAVENLY FATHER

*Children of our Heavenly Father  
Safely in his bosom gather;  
Nestling bird nor star in heaven  
Such a refuge e’er was given.*

*Neither life nor death shall ever  
From the Lord his children sever;  
Unto them his grace he showeth,  
And their sorrows all he knoweth.*

*Though he giveth or he taketh,  
God his children ne’er forsaketh;  
His the loving purpose solely  
To preserve them pure and holy.*  
—Caroline V. Sandell-Berg<sup>26</sup>

The second poem, “I Want You,” is characterized by heavy repetition of the same language, a focus on self, and a lack of awareness about the person who is wanted. The poem’s persona has a powerful wish which must be granted immediately, or he will quickly be engulfed by grief, loss, and pain. The “you” being addressed is an instrument to bring his well-being into balance, not from his own efforts.

#### I WANT YOU

*I want you when the shades of eve are falling  
And purpling shadows drift across the land;  
When sleepy birds to loving mates are calling—  
I want the soothing softness of your hand.*

*I want you when the stars shine up above me,  
And Heaven’s flooded with the bright moonlight;  
I want you with your arms and lips to love me  
Throughout the wonder watches of the night . . .*

*I want you when my soul is thrilled with passion;  
I want you when I’m weary and depressed;  
I want you when in lazy, slumbrous fashion  
My senses need the haven of your breast . . .*

*I want you, dear, through every changing season;  
I want you with a tear or smile;  
I want you more than any rhyme or reason—  
I want you, want you, want you—all the while.*

—Arthur L. Gillom<sup>27</sup>

STAGE 4: MYTHIC-MEMBERSHIP/CONFORMIST. We generally arrive at this stage, the first of the three “personal” stages, during elementary school years, and the majority of us never truly leave it. We may from time to time be elevated to new heights—experiencing greater love or increased awareness—but we then return to our home in the everyday world. At this stage, our limbic system (the emotional center of the brain) is in full sway, and we are primarily capable of dichotomized thinking. Our world is still mostly black and white, but it assumes some external order because we now learn, by rote at first, the rules of fairness, that others have rights, and that we should love others even if we don’t always get our way. Our frontal cortex, which is the seat of reasoning skills and impulse control, is starting to develop greater complexity and becomes more influential.

This stage is characterized by conformity. We define ourselves by our social roles, even though we know we only partially fit them. We show others that we love them through correct action and, at times, experience great intensity of feeling. As we internalize these rules for relationships, we begin to live by a moral code. It is usually a concrete, easy-to-understand map of behaviors. We do not yet understand that principles are abstractions that can be interpreted in various correct ways, so we place great stress on sorting our world

into clear categories and behaving in ways that observably match the rules. In return, we then expect to feel certain feelings.

The world's major religions train us to reach this stage. Civilization cannot be maintained unless the majority of us achieve this level of development. The workhorses of the world are the parents, citizens, church members, soldiers, and employees who are responsible, consistent, and dutiful. In this stage, we become civilized, cooperative, take turns, and even create rules for fair fighting. According to most religions, sex and spirit occupy separate compartments—so they can meet only under authorized circumstances. The lyrics of some of our most popular Mormon hymns communicate this stage: “Do what is right; let the consequence follow,” and “Redeemer of Israel, our only delight . . . our shadow by day and our pillar by night.”

Notice in the following poem, “Crazy Quilt,” how the thinking has become noticeably more complex than in the earlier poems. It communicates the nascent understanding that God must undertake a process in our behalf, not just grant a wish, and that people do not simply occupy categories of good and bad but must somehow be knit together in love.

#### CRAZY QUILT

*The Liberty Bell in Philadelphia  
is cracked. California is splitting  
off. There is no East and West, no rhyme,  
no reason to it. We are scattered.*

*Dear Lord, lest we all be somewhere  
else, patch this work. Quilt us  
together, feather-stitching piece  
by piece our tag-ends of living,  
our individual scraps of love.*

—Jane Wilson Joyce<sup>28</sup>

During this stage, the rules governing intimate relationships start to come into focus. We stress congeniality. We learn our culture's conventions for romance and intimacy. Sexual impulses are still intense, only slowly coming under our control. Our view of our sexual partner(s) is still very simplistic. The moral code is frequently seen as being at war with sexual impulses. At times, morality and sexuality occupy the uneasy peace of separate compartments. At other times, we use the cultural taboos surrounding sexual morality to suppress or resist sexual “temptation.” At other times, our sexual impulses override the dictates of conventional morality. Through their conventional phrasing and tone, the following two poems show these dichotomies:

#### ANY WIFE OR HUSBAND

*Let us be guests in one another's house  
With deferential “No” and courteous “Yes”;*

*Let us take care to hide our foolish moods  
Behind a certain show of cheerfulness.*

*Let us avoid all sullen silences;  
We should find fresh and sprightly things to say;  
I must be fearful lest you find me dull,  
And you must dread to bore me any way.*

*Let us knock gently at each other's heart,  
Glad of a chance to look within—and yet  
Let us remember that to force one's way  
Is the unpardoned breach of etiquette.*

*So shall I be hostess—you, the host—  
Until all need for entertainment ends;  
We shall be lovers when the last door shuts,  
But what is better still—we shall be friends.  
—Carol Haynes<sup>29</sup>*

#### THE WANT OF YOU

*The want of you is like no other thing;  
It smites my soul with sudden sickening;  
It binds my being with a wreath of rue—  
This want of you.*

*It flashes on me with the waking sun;  
It creeps upon me when the day is done;  
It hammers at my heart the long night through—  
This want of you.*

*It sighs within me with the misting skies;  
Oh, all the day within my heart it cries,  
Old as your absence, yet each moment new—  
This want of you.*

*Mad with demand and aching with despair,  
It leaps within my heart and you are—where?  
God has forgotten, or he never knew—  
This want of you.*

—Ivan Leonard Wright<sup>30</sup>

STAGE 5: RATIONAL/ACHIEVEMENT OR AFFILIATIVE. This stage may be achieved any time from adolescence onward. At this level of development, we attain what I referred to earlier as “the continental divide” of maturity: we are finally capable of seeing our own interests as equally important as the interests of others. We may evaluate another's perspective sympathetically without feeling our own sense of security is threatened. We develop critical-thinking skills. We learn to discriminate. In our brains, the neocortex, the seat of reasoning, is becoming dominant, making us capable of dialectical and abstract reasoning. We acquire this neurological capability in later adolescence, but few of us employ it fully, and when we do, we are often in middle or late adulthood because

we must slowly train our emotions to follow our fair and heartfelt reasoning.

Our capacity to love now can grow exponentially because we can really value another for his or her individual self and individual preferences, while at the same time valuing our own. In this stage, paradoxically, we also become more of an individual with our own interests and reflexive thoughts, while simultaneously becoming less egocentric for we see how we relate to everyone and everything else in our larger world. Our autonomy *and* our connections increase in breadth and depth. Our minds and hearts start to play together.

Wilber calls this stage the rational stage while Wade differentiates between men and women in this stage. Men, she argues, incline toward achievement in this phase, becoming increasingly at home in a competitive world. They use their growing capacity for reflexive thinking and options for action in that sphere. In contrast, women move into affiliation, honing their perceptivity and collaborative skills in relationships. Although both genders often categorize *their* preference as intellectually and morally superior, Wade maintains that both preferences require the same brain capability, level of abstraction, and practical options for action. The gender trajectories are neither higher nor lower, but different. In fact, neither approach is capable of producing the higher-level mental skills of synthetic thinking and consensus building, so each path is necessarily limited. Interestingly, moving from either trajectory to the next stage of maturity requires that we learn the awareness and skills of the other.

Spiritually, Stage 5 is a period of reflection and often of doubt for many. In this stage, we feel the need to undergird our faith with rational and objective data. We start to engage God in a discussion, even a debate. Those of us who remain spiritually identified with a particular religious tradition begin a long discourse with ourselves and others, often lasting for decades. Because we feel the need to explore areas of tension and silence, we found publications such as *Dialogue*, *SUNSTONE*, and *Exponent II* and establish publishing houses such as Signature Books. As Stage 5 adults, we become aware of our own rigidity and judgmentalness, and search for a broader faith. We incorporate doubt and skepticism as part of our corrective, maturing views. We may identify with President Hugh B. Brown: "No man deserves to believe until he has served an apprenticeship of doubt."<sup>31</sup> Others among us pursue different paths, declaring that God is a construct and rejecting spiritual realities as improbable or impossible. However, Wilber maintains that this stage of reason is still more spiritual than earlier stages:

The very depth of reason, its capacity for universal-pluralism, its insistence on universal tolerance, its grasp of global-planetary perspectivism, its insistence on universal benevolence and compassion: these are the manifestations of its genuine depth, its *genuine* spirituality. These capacities are not *revealed* to reason from *without*.... They issue from *within* its own structure, its own *inherent* depth.<sup>32</sup>

The following two poems reflect the mental reflexiveness, mingling of doubt and belief, and the robust sense of self characteristic of this stage.

REVOLUTIONARY PATIENCE (excerpt)

*I don't as they put it believe in god  
but to him I cannot say no hard as I try  
take a look at him in the garden  
when his friends ran out on him  
his face wet with fear  
and with the spit of his enemies  
him I have to believe*

*Him I can't bear to abandon  
to the great disregard for life  
to the monotonous passing of millions of years  
to the moronic rhythm of work leisure and work  
to the boredom we fail to dispel  
in cars in beds in stores*

*That's how it is they say, what do you want  
uncertain and not uncritically  
I subscribe to the other hypothesis  
which is his story  
that's not how it is he said for god is  
and he staked his life on this claim*

*Thinking about it I find  
one can't let him pay alone  
for his hypothesis  
so I believe him about  
god*

*The way one believes another's laughter  
his tears  
or marriage or no for an answer  
that's how you'll learn  
to believe him about life  
promised to all*

—Dorothy Soelle<sup>33</sup>

HOLY THE FIRM (excerpt)

*Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? Or who shall stand in his holy place? There is no one but us. There is no one to send, nor a clean hand, nor a pure heart on the face of the earth, nor in the earth, but only us, a generation comforting ourselves with the notion that we have come at an awkward time, that our innocent fathers are all dead—as if innocence had ever been—and our children busy and troubled, and we ourselves unfit, not yet ready, having each of us chosen wrongly, made a false start, failed, yielded to impulse and*

*the tangled comfort of pleasures, and grown exhausted, unable to seek the thread, weak, and involved. But there is no one but us. There never has been.*

—Annie Dillard<sup>34</sup>

Sexuality also comes into fuller flowering at Stage 5. Our increases in mental and feeling capabilities allow us to have more complex and rich relational experiences. Reflexive mental and emotional skills allow us to analyze, understand, and heal from shame, trauma, or restrictive past learning. New ways of enjoying sex and love come within the context of keen and more mature moral capabilities.

To be sure, not all people become more morally reflexive as they grow. And many who acquire new mental and sexual awareness have not invested equal effort in moral development, so their lives may seem less, rather than more, mature. But for those who continue the effort towards deeper growth, remarkable new awareness in body and mind will ensue. The two poems that follow capture dimensions of this kind of mental and physical maturing.

#### MIDNIGHT

*After making love  
beneath the wings of the ceiling fan,  
we will rappel,  
make our unnatural descent,  
step off the sheer cliff of waketime.*

*Soon we will let go  
of the muslin drapes and high, white walls  
and you will slip  
into rhythmic breathing, your limbs  
trembling down the length of sleep.*

*You will use your arms  
to control the downward slide; your knees  
wedged inside mine,  
your hand bracing me in this cocoon.*

*And breath after breath,  
we will let the reliable cues  
swallow us down  
like gravity, until we fall  
untied in our naked safety.*

—Alison Kolodinsky<sup>35</sup>

#### MANON REASSURES HER LOVER

*When I cannot sleep, I stroke you,  
and like a napping cat that purrs  
and stretches when touched, you linger  
with pleasure on the edge of waking,  
curling far into slumber. You know*

*that I am watching, you are safe.  
Your skin is soft, smells fresh.*

*I love how your face is sculpted,  
the drapes and furrows, how your cheek  
laps over your forearm as you sleep.  
I love how your skin moves under my hand,  
the way it sags on the muscle and bone,  
as the skin of a ripe peach  
slips loose almost without the knife.*

*I have no hunger for young flesh,  
unripe, firm but tasteless by comparison  
You are still at the very peak  
of ripeness, sweet, with the tang  
that quenches thirst. I would like  
to take a gentle bite from your shoulder,  
golden in the faint light from the window.*

—Martha Elizabeth<sup>36</sup>

At this stage, sex and spirit become acquainted. They dialogue. They relate. Their underlying similarities come to our view at times, but not yet continuously. After a rich time of lovemaking, love often spills over to include everyone in our lives. A sense of vibrancy emerges, and we may become consciously aware of the spirituality in affectionate and sexual experience.

STAGE 6: VISION-LOGIC/AUTHENTIC. In Stage 6, the individual self finally becomes mature, most often occurring, when it does, in middle to late adulthood. In this stage, we become world-focused, taking our individual place as one citizen of the large, delightful, and suffering world. For most personality theorists, this stage is the ultimate level of development. However, I agree with the transpersonal theorists that our moral sense, our spirituality, and our sexuality can continue to develop.

At Stage 6, our neurological abilities are entering full flower. The brain transcends the earlier hemispheric period, in which one hemisphere of the brain dominates the other. Now both spheres begin to coordinate, possibly forming new lateral connections and allowing a three-dimensional vision of the world, of ideas, and of people. Synthetic thinking—or the ability to see and integrate ideas, facts, and behavior from many perspectives—emerges as a result of this new neurological capacity. In seeing many others' views, synthesizing them, and empathizing with them, we can also see where their (and our!) views may be partial, only a piece of the larger truth.

With these new skills and insights, Stage 6 thinkers can resolve most of their internal conflicts or at least find ways to reconcile them without suppression. At this stage, we are no longer paralyzed by paradoxes. At times, our ordinary experiences spontaneously generate quite extraordinary insights and syntheses. We integrate opposites, value ambiguity, accept uncertainty as the norm, and value a life fully lived over ultimate

answers. Indeed, we live out these paradoxes, note incongruities with serenity, not judgment, and tolerantly view conflicts in cultural scripts or in the mysteries of life and death as valuable learning experiences. Even death can lose its terrors at this stage, to be seen as another adventure.<sup>37</sup>

Abraham Maslow identified this stage as “self-actualization.” It is characterized by a great jump in our ability to love. We can now enjoy others, including their differences—even differences that compete with ours—with greater compassion. Competition and debate decrease; consensus and understanding increase. Maslow, who studied self-actualizing people, wrote at length on love among those with authentic selves. He concluded that they love more fully and enjoy life precisely because they could see reality more clearly and were less invested in their own way.<sup>38</sup> James Hillman, a noted psychologist, though without using Maslow’s term, also found that, for some, the capacity to love accompanies the aging process:

A certain love for the world deepens recognition of its beauty. . . . There seems to be more acceptance in the love between old people, more respect for the other person and their foibles. We learn to appreciate our partner’s oddities, and to realize what a miracle it is that we’re still together. . . . We learn to give one another more space, to take more interest in what’s going on in each other’s life. Not what medications we’re taking, or what our pulse rates might be, but what we’re reading and dreaming about, what memories are returning to us, what peculiar reflection just turned in our minds—something we haven’t thought of for years. We become more interested in each other’s souls; that’s the interesting part.<sup>39</sup>

Sexuality and spirituality find common ground as never before. They become fascinating aspects of integrated experience. Both are seen as rooted in loving others, loving self, and loving the world. Those who do not claim spiritual experience, or see spirit as an important element in their lives, still have a vibrant sense of life and often an inner sense of mission or service to others.<sup>40</sup>

Since ideas and language flow more fluidly than ever before, we make new connections and networks of connections between ideas, peoples, and positions. The poems that follow celebrate life’s fluent and vibrant qualities. Life, even in its simplest expressions, sings.

#### WELCOME MORNING

*There is joy  
in all:  
in the hair I brush each morning,  
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,  
that I rub my body with each morning,  
in the chapel of eggs I cook  
each morning,  
in the outcry from the kettle*

*that heats my coffee  
each morning,  
in the spoon and the chair  
that cry “hello there, Anne.”*

*All this is God,  
right here in my pea-green house  
each morning  
and I mean  
though I often forget,  
to give thanks,  
to faint down by the kitchen table  
in a prayer of rejoicing  
as the holy birds at the kitchen window  
peck into their marriage of seeds.*

*So while I think of it,  
let me paint a thank-you on my palm  
for this God, this laughter of the morning,  
lest it go unspoken.*

*The Joy that isn’t shared, I’ve heard  
dies young.*

—Anne Sexton<sup>41</sup>

#### PSALM 1

*Blessed are the man and the woman  
who have grown beyond their greed  
and have put an end to their hatred  
and no longer nourish illusions.  
But they delight in the way things are  
and keep their hearts open, day and night.  
They are like trees planted near flowing rivers,  
which bear fruit when they are ready.  
Their leaves will not fall or wither.  
Everything they do will succeed.*

—Translated by Stephen Mitchell<sup>42</sup>

#### THE IMAGE OF ME FLOWING THROUGH YOU

*The image of me flowing through you  
everywhere,  
all the membranes gone transparent,  
the holding released  
and so a washing.  
I felt me pouring, and you.*

*You knew then all that I knew,  
arms and legs circling,  
the core enclosed,  
the two/one of us  
balanced and still.*

*Oh the welcome, the ease,  
the walls saturated,*

*slithering into soft mounds.  
We breathed,  
we drank,  
taking care not to tear the lace.*

—David Steinberg<sup>43</sup>

STAGES 7, 8, 9: THE TRANSPERSONAL STAGES. Wilber, Wade, and many others have mapped these next three stages after comparing representations and descriptions of stages of spiritual development in major world religions and mystical traditions.<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, those stages usually begin where normal ego-functioning generally ends, that point which most theorists call the highest developmental stage.

When we achieve these stages, we find that transcendent or spiritual experiences are not rare and transitory. We genuinely start to live “in” these experiences more continuously, changing “altered states to permanent traits.”<sup>45</sup> Not only do we have more intense and more continuous spiritual experiences; but when we reach these stages, deeper and richer personality characteristics begin to emerge. Indeed, we come to value dramatic or striking experiences less. They are simply side effects of living the devoted life, which is valued for its own rich textures and deep harmonies. Generally those who achieve transpersonal stages have practiced spiritual disciplines over a long period of time and have also lived a long, responsible, and loving life. As we might guess, very few people attain these stages. The price of admission is high, requiring decades of mental, emotional, relational, and spiritual discipline.

According to Wade, the brain continues to acquire neurological capacity during the transpersonal stages. Both hemispheres become fully interactive with each other. At the highest stages, we might even acquire conscious control over the lower brain structures.<sup>46</sup> Empirical evidence for this hypothesis is found in studies of experienced meditators who can move quickly and easily between deep states of meditation, with accompanying slow delta brain wave frequencies, to everyday, waking states of consciousness, which has much faster beta brain wave frequencies, while having full control over their brain states at all times.<sup>47</sup>

Although these three stages share a great deal in common, each also has its own differences. Wilber describes the psychic/transcendent stage (Stage 7) as being in *communion* with God or Spirit. It generally involves a sense of oneness with the natural world. The subtle/transcendent stage (Stage 8) is typically experienced as *union* with God. (See the poem “We Awaken in Christ’s Body” below.) The causal/unity stage (Stage 9) is experienced as *identity* with God and all that is. James Fowler sees Jesus’ statement that he is “the way, the truth, and the life” and the statements of mystics who claim they are an exact mirror of God as potent examples of the sense of identity with God or Spirit that characterizes very advanced levels of development.

Far from becoming detached from reality, individuals in these three stages function very well in everyday activities. In fact, their competence may increase, despite the usually in-

creasing age of the individual. People in these stages live life for the larger human family. Their lives are not self-centered or focused just on personal, internal spiritual experiences.

Sex and spirit are now fully integrated, along with most of life’s experiences, including pain and suffering. No human experience is excluded. All are a part of all that is. Many mystical texts describe both sex and spirit simultaneously. Body and soul are one.

The poems that follow can be read both as prayers to God and also as expressions of sexual experience. In fact, reading and holding both concepts in mind simultaneously provide an extraordinarily rich literary experience.

#### FOLDED INTO THE RIVER

*Your face is the light in here that makes  
my arms full of gentleness.  
The beginning of a month-long holiday, the disc  
of the full moon, the shade of your hair,  
these draw me in. I dive  
into the deep pool of a mountain river,  
folded into union,  
as the split-second when the bat meets the ball,  
and there is one cry between us.*

—Rumi (1207–1273)<sup>48</sup>

wild nights! wild nights!

*Wild Nights—Wild Nights!  
Were I with thee  
Wild nights should be  
Our luxury!  
Futile—the Winds—  
To a Heart in port—  
Done with the Compass—  
Done with the Chart!  
Rowing in Eden—  
Ah, the Sea!  
Might I but moor—Tonight—  
In Thee!*

—Emily Dickinson<sup>49</sup>

spring song

*the green of Jesus  
is breaking the ground  
and the sweet  
smell of delicious Jesus  
is opening the house and  
the dance of Jesus music  
has hold of the air and  
the world is turning  
the body of Jesus and  
the future is possible.*

—Lucille Clifton<sup>50</sup>

## OUT BEYOND IDEAS

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,  
there is a field. I'll meet you there.  
When the soul lies down in that grass,  
the world is too full to talk about.  
Ideas, language, even the phrase each other  
doesn't make any sense.*

—Rumi<sup>51</sup>

## THE LOVERS

*See how in their veins all becomes spirit:  
into each other they mature and grow.  
Like axles, their forms tremblingly orbit,  
round which it whirls, bewitching, aglow.  
Thirsters, they receive drink,  
watchers, they receive sight.  
Let them into each other sink,  
around each other a constant light.*

—translated and adapted from  
Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>52</sup>

## THE HOLY LONGING

*Tell a wise person, or else keep silent,  
because the massman will mock it right away.  
I praise what is truly alive,  
what longs to be burned to death.  
In the calm water of the love-nights,  
where you were begotten, where you have begotten,  
a strange feeling comes over you  
when you see the silent candle burning.  
Now you are no longer caught  
in the obsession with darkness,  
and a desire for higher love-making  
sweeps you upward.  
Distance does not make you falter,  
now, arriving in magic, flying,  
and, finally, insane for the light,  
you are the butterfly and you are gone.  
And so long as you haven't experienced  
this: to die and so to grow,  
you are only a troubled guest  
on the dark earth.*

—Goethe, translated by Robert Bly<sup>53</sup>

## WE AWAKEN IN CHRIST'S BODY

*We awaken in Christ's body  
as Christ awakens in our bodies,  
and my poor hand is Christ, He enters  
my foot and is infinitely me.  
I move my hand, and wonderfully  
my hand becomes Christ, becomes all of Him  
(for God is indivisibly*

*whole, seamless in His Godhood).*

*I move my foot, and at once  
He appears like a flash of lightning,  
Do my words seem blasphemous?—Then  
open your heart to Him.  
and let yourself receive the one  
who is opening to you so deeply.  
For if we genuinely love Him,  
we wake up inside Christ's body  
where all our body, all over,  
every most hidden part of it,  
is realized in joy as Him,  
and he makes us, utterly real,  
and everything that is hurt, everything  
that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,  
maimed, ugly, irreparably  
damaged, is in Him transformed  
and recognized as whole, as lovely,  
and radiant in His light  
we awaken as the Beloved  
in every last part of our body.*

—Symeon the New Theologian (940–1022 A.D.)<sup>54</sup>

## GOD SPEAKS TO THE SOUL

*And God said to the soul:  
I desired you before the world began.  
I desire you now  
As you desire me,  
And where the desires of two come together  
There love is perfected.*

—Mechthild of Magdeburg<sup>55</sup>

## HOW THE SOUL SPEAKS TO GOD

*Lord, you are my lover,  
My longing,  
My flowing stream,  
My sun,  
And I am your reflection.*

—Mechthild of Magdeburg<sup>56</sup>

## MEDITATIONS OF JULIAN OF NORWICH (excerpt)

*I understood that  
our sensuality is grounded  
in Nature, in Compassion  
and in Grace  
This enables us to receive  
gifts that lead to everlasting life  
For I saw that in our sensuality  
God is  
For God is never out of  
the soul.*

—Julian of Norwich<sup>57</sup>

## BUDDHA IN GLORY

Center of all centers, core of cores,  
almond self-enclosed and growing sweet—  
all this universe, to the furthest stars  
and beyond them, is your flesh, your fruit.

Now you feel how nothing clings to you;  
your vast shell reaches into endless space,  
and there the rich, thick fluids rise and flow,  
Illuminated in your infinite peace,

a billion stars go spinning through the night,  
blazing high above your head.  
But in you is the presence that  
will be, when all the stars are dead.  
—Rainer Maria Rilke<sup>58</sup>

**I**T SEEMS PERSPECTIVE is everything. We are both limited and broadened by our views of life and our capacities to live it. Hopefully, this sample of the broadest and deepest viewpoints of many thinkers will enable and challenge us to integrate all facets of life—including sex and spirit—within ourselves and with others beyond our current imaginings in a sea of ever-deepening love.

## NOTES

1. Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1960), 917.

2. For instance, mystics within the world's major religions assert this as truth. Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism each have major masters and writers who describe the deepest reaches of spiritual realities as a direct experience with love. For one example, see Ken Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution* (Boston: Shambhala, 1995), 338.

3. Paul Tillich, in Ken Wilber, *The Eye of Spirit: An Integral Vision for a World Gone Slightly Mad* (Boston: Shambhala, 1997), 221. See also, William Reese, ed., *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought*, Expanded ed. (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 1999), 771.

4. Audre Lorde, "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power," (excerpt), *Cries of the Spirit: A Celebration of Women's Spirituality*, ed. Marilyn Sewell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 210.

5. Jenny Wade, "Mysticism and Sexual Experience," *Conference: Transpersonal Perspectives at the Millennium, Association for Transpersonal Psychology* (San Francisco, 1998). Recording in personal possession, available from Conference Recording Service (800) 647-1110. Wade describes examples of how orgasmic sexual experience and transcendent experiences are similar and at times linked.

6. Jean Latz Griffin, "The Paradox of Self" (an interview with Mark Epstein), *Common Boundary: A Journal of Psychotherapy and Spirituality* 16 (November/December, 1998): 32. See also, Mark Epstein, *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart: A Buddhist Perspective on Wholeness* (New York: Broadway Books, 1999).

7. This notion has been discussed by many personality theorists from Carl Jung forward. Good discussions can be found in John Rowan, *Subpersonalities* (New York: Routledge, 1990); John G. Watkins and Helen H. Watkins, *Ego States* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1997); Ken Wilber, *Integral Psychology* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), 100-02; Robert Kegan, *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1994), 313, 316.

8. A line of development denotes a particular area that grows in complexity and capability through time, such as intellectual and physical maturity, musician-ship, etc.

9. In developing these tools, I have relied on Ken Wilber, Mark Epstein, and Jenny Wade, cited elsewhere in these notes, as well as my own observations. Many of these ideas have been drawn from Ken Wilber's "Twenty Tenets" of evolution articulated in his work, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, and later made more readable in Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything* (Boston: Shambhala, 1996).

10. *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1993), 1435, 455.

11. Wilber, *Sex Ecology, Spirituality*, 51.

12. For a good discussion of this, see Jenny Wade, *Changes of Mind: A Holonomic Theory of the Evolution of Consciousness* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), 159-174. Wade synthesizes all major personality and developmental theorists to provide an extensive overview of each stage of development. The holonomic paradigm (from *holos* [wholeness] and *nomos* [law]) holds the view that "the ultimate nature of physical reality is an undivided whole in perpetual flux. . . . Every portion of the flow (i.e., flux) contains the entire flow, just as each small part of a hologram contains information about the entire image. . . ." There is a "simultaneous interrelatedness and interpenetration of all phenomena." Wade, 7-8.

13. Wilber, *Integral Psychology*, 15.

14. Mark Epstein, *Paths Beyond Ego: The Transpersonal Vision* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1993), 121; Ken Wilber, *The Eye of Spirit*, 228.

15. Reason and feeling are often seen as opposites, when in reality they are intertwined. For us to identify, name, and describe the physical sensations in our bodies as emotions that have richness and meaning we must have reached a certain threshold of cognitive development. The more language we have to identify our emotions, the more skilled we become at feeling them and, simultaneously, we become better assessors of value and meaning. Likewise, those who say they are "thinking" people, yet have little emotion, often fail to identify the sensations and emotions they experience and so do not include them in their worldview. To progress toward full development, however, we must include both facets.

16. Jean Baker Miller, "Development of Women's Sense of Self," *Women's Growth in Connection: Writings from the Stone Center*, eds. Judith V. Jordan, et al. (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), 11-26. Miller uses the term "being-in-relationship" and quotes others who use "agency-in-community" to illustrate how a self is formed with both factors being present simultaneously all the time.

17. The totals in the column add up to more than 100%. See Wilber, *Integral Psychology*, 48-53.

18. Joseph Campbell, with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), 31.

19. Abraham Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

20. Lawrence Kohlberg, *Essays on Moral Development*, vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

21. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1982).

22. James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1981).

23. The number of stages varies, but six is the best average. For a summary chart of many major personality theorists, the number of stages each uses, and how they compare with each other, see Wilber, *Integral Psychology*, 201-08 and Wade, *Changes of Mind*, 272.

24. Ken Wilber, *A Brief History of Everything* is the briefest synopsis of his work, which includes more than a dozen books. At least two others are required for the serious reader: *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* and Ken Wilber, Jack Engler, and Daniel P. Brown, *Transformations of Consciousness: Conventional and Contemplative Perspectives on Development* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986).

25. Wade, 1997.

26. Carolyn V. Sandell-Berg, "Children of Our Heavenly Father," *Eloquent Woman*, ed. Sidney B. Smith (Salt Lake City: n.p., 1990), 169; also in *Hymns of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), 299.

27. Arthur L. Gillom, "I Want You," *Best-Loved Poems of the American People*, ed. Hazel Felleman (New York: Doubleday, 1936), 45.

28. Jane Wilson Joyce, "Crazy Quilt," *Cries of the Spirit*, 135.

29. Carol Haynes, "Any Wife or Husband," *Best-Loved Poems*, 23.

30. Ivan Leonard Wright, "The Want of You," *Best-Loved Poems*, 56-7.

31. As remembered by his daughter, Mary Brown Firmage Woodward. This quote was likely in a speech and may or may not be in print.

32. Wilber, *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality*, 250-51.

33. Dorothy Soelle, "Revolutionary Patience," *Cries of the Spirit*, 198.

34. Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm* (excerpt), *Cries of the Spirit*, 254.

35. Alison Kolodinsky, "Midnight," *Passionate Hearts*, ed. Wendy Maltz (Novato, California: New World Library, 1996), 81.
36. Martha Elizabeth, "Manon Reassures Her Lover," *Passionate Hearts*, 161.
37. Wade, 159–74.
38. Maslow, 153, 181–202.
39. Mark Matousek, "Face the Music and Dance: An Interview with James Hillman," *Modern Maturity* 42 (November/December, 1999): 44.
40. Wade, 172.
41. Anne Sexton, "Welcome Morning," *Cries of the Spirit*, 200.
42. Stephen Mitchell, "Psalm 1," *A Book of Psalms: Selected and Adapted from the Hebrew* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993), 3.
43. David Steinberg, "The Image of Me Flowing Through You," *Passionate Hearts*, 77.
44. Wilber discussed this initially in *Transformations of Consciousness*. More recently, a compilation drawing from many western authors and religions can be found in *Integral Psychology*, 209–11.
45. Wilber, *Integral Psychology*, 15.
46. Wade, 198–99.
47. Ken Wilber, *One Taste: The Journals of Ken Wilber* (Boston: Shambhala, 1999), 75–77; Wilber, *Transformations of Consciousness*, 161–219.
48. Rumi, "Folded Into the River," *Open Secret: Versions of Rumi*, eds., John Moyne and Coleman Barks (Putney, Vermont: Threshold Books, 1984), 54.
49. Emily Dickinson, "wild nights! wild nights!" *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, 249.
50. Lucille Clifton, "spring song," *good woman: poems and a memoir 1969–1980* (Brockport, New York: BOA Editions Limited, 1987), 106.
51. Rumi, "Out Beyond Ideas," *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*, ed. Stephen Mitchell (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), 59.
52. Rainer Maria Rilke, "The Lovers," cited in John J. L. Mood, *Rilke on Love and Other Difficulties* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1975), 51. (Adapted by Marybeth Raynes).
53. Johann Wolfgang Goethe, "The Holy Longing," cited in Robert Bly, *News of the Universe: poems of twofold consciousness* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1980), 38.
54. Symeon the New Theologian, "We Awaken in Christ's Body," *The Enlightened Heart*, 38.
55. Mechthild of Magdeburg, "God Speaks to the Soul," *Women in Praise of the Sacred: 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women*, ed. Jane Hirshfield (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 88.
56. Mechthild of Magdeburg, "How the Soul Speaks to God," *Women in Praise of the Sacred*, 89.
57. "Meditations of Julian of Norwich (excerpt), *Cries of the Spirit*, 207.
58. Rainer Maria Rilke, "Buddha in Glory," *The Enlightened Heart*, 131.



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## FOR THE END OF TIME

. . . *the harmonious silence of heaven.*  
Olivier Messiaen

Here in the North there is no night:  
vapors of Dusk blur time and space,  
I wait for Dawn's half light  
to streak the sky emerging.

Silence. All creation blinks:  
Aurora Borealis blitzes the heavens,  
sea-shades bounce off blueberries,  
earth sings in a blaze of silver.

—CHARLOTTE F. OTTEN

## AFTER MY WIFE LEFT FOR WORK

and I, reclining still in bed  
under a checkerboard afghan  
and sometimes-works electric blanket,  
know the trees are tattooed with frost  
and the gutters heavy with icicles.  
Through heavy chintz curtains  
and shuttered blinds, the morning is diluted  
to a murmur. It longs to sing of cold  
and snow, the geography of white.  
Let me lie here and listen deep.

—RYAN G. VAN CLEAVE