

When a truth has been kept locked up for a while and has begun to hurt, the sudden opening tends to come with a tearing, a certain violence. We all know this: When we let out pent-up steam, the hiss is going to be louder than we intend and the heat potentially more hurtful than we would like. That's precisely why we bite our tongue — for fear that our truth will come out with a mean hiss and hurt like hell. As long as we hold back, we feel in control. When we let our truth out, we are less in control. We often feel completely out of control. We don't know how our truth will sound, we don't know what it will do. It could be devastating, someone might get badly burned, it might be the end of everything. But it could also be the beginning of everything. Telling the truth is an adventure, a loosening of control in order to do something daring. This is the first element truth has in common with good sex.

“SEX IS MAGIC”

Now, if telling the truth seems that dangerous, we can logically assume that we are up against something. Some authority sits in judgment over us, ready to condemn us. There is some ideal that we are supposed to embody, but don't. Some secret expectation needs to be fulfilled by us. There is some magical bliss we are supposed to experience. What we are up against, the powerful forces that keep us biting our tongue, are MYTHS. Myths about sex. Myths are beliefs we inherit from our culture of origin, our environment, our family upbringing — beliefs that are intended to shape our social behavior and attitudes. “All women are natural-born mothers.” Or “Men have a strong natural sex drive, women don't.” Myths are often simply false beliefs. Myths about sex and gender make heavy use of nature. They carry the headline “Tried and True since Adam and Eve,” and they come with the instruction: “Take my word for it — don't even try to find out if it's really true.” Not long ago, we had the myth of women's vaginal orgasm as the only orgasm that could count; and not long before that, according to Victorian myth, women had no sexual desire and no orgasm at all.

When we ask today which myths make it hard for lesbian couples to tell each other the truth in matters of sex, the following three regularly show up:

Myth 1. She should just know. We are both women, we have the same body, therefore she should know what feels good and give me pleasure.

Myth 2. There is no magic if I have to explain. It spoils everything—the romance, the surprise, the excitement—if I have to talk. Talking only interrupts. If I have to constantly provide her with a user's manual, forget about pleasure.

Myth 3. Sex is an instinct, therefore it comes naturally. If it doesn't come naturally and easily, there's something wrong with her ... or with me; there's something wrong with us as a couple, and we certainly won't have great sex by talking and jabbering.

These myths are so much part of our culture and upbringing that we may not even be aware that they are our bed companions. Powerful beliefs like these hook us into the romantic notion that sex is magic and that great sex is natural and easy, or else it's not great sex.

I propose to debunk these myths. In order to achieve truth and good sex, in my view, we have to admit to ourselves and each other that :

1) Every woman's body is different. We cannot assume that we know a thing about our lover's body, especially given the little we tend to know about our own.

2) We have to let go of expecting our partner to be the magical lover with x-ray eyes who reads all our secrets and knows our instruction manual by heart the minute she sets eyes on us. We can't go on waiting for our secrets to be guessed. Sex is communication. Sexual guessing games are like the lottery, where our chances to win are one in a million.

3) Nothing sexual in our culture is natural and easy, except for sex in Hollywood movies. Everything sexual in our culture—and therefore in our beds—is complicated and uneasy, and this malaise is not likely to change unless we stop buying into myths and instead begin to find and communicate our own individual truth. Or, to put this in a more positive light, sex must be learned, and it can be. Good sex together is like dancing well together. A lot of information has to be exchanged before two people, each with her own style of movement, can dance together with fluidity and grace.

I'D RATHER DIE THAN TELL HER

Exposing our private myths and secret beliefs can seem a scary proposition at first—a proposition we would rather avoid. We can take a guess now why our first couple never addressed the issue head on—Annie, who is too young to give up on sex, and Lou, who is never in the mood any more. We can tell, for example, that there is a mythical belief at work:

A truly happy couple would be in the mood to make love on a Sunday morning, and if this is not so, it's a shameful shortcoming. For fear of failure as a couple, it was never spelled out between them that desire takes more than having a calendar at hand.

In the case of Mariushka, the actress, and Sybil, the record producer's assistant—the couple for whom sex has turned into relentless work—we detect a variation on the theme. Sybil and Mariushka believe gay male couples are enviable and there is something wrong with women. For them, it's the old gender bias: Men are sexual, women not. So if they act like men, great sex should be a given. If they have the right toolbox and work the tools hard enough, there ought to be magical sex. When things are not working the way our big myths have promised us they would, we can feel let down by our partners and by ourselves. We enter a state of depression, which we could call mute sexual misery. Our sex life is anything but a fairy tale. We take the malaise personally, can't even share it with our best friend (who is no doubt having great sex three times a night). The muteness of our misery makes our situation seem hopeless. We are defeated, judged, and condemned, by ourselves, without even a hearing. The lesbian bed death must be our fate. We get into fights, and the relief of reconciliation is short-lived. We project our malaise on small, insufferable traits in our lover that turn us off—things so small, we are too embarrassed to even mention them. And now we are suddenly supposed to 'fess up about them? Most couples coming to see me are shocked by the idea. When I see each partner alone for check-ins, I hear her protest: “ You really mean I ought to tell her I can't stand her bad breath in the morning when she wants to make out? Talk about my phobia of breast hair? Tell her I'd like her to wear this special lace slip that belonged to my mother, that turns me on? Ask her to be more rough with me because I need to fantasize about men in order to come? Are you saying I ought to tell her I am holding back because I am afraid to fart? You mean I could tell her I'm hooked on massage as foreplay when she is already wildly jealous of my ex, the masseuse?”

Tell the truth ...? The initial reaction tends to be: “I'd rather die. I'd rather make do with what we have. It's a bit boring, okay, but better to have this than nothing.”

Or I hear: “Oh, I tried to tell her, but she doesn't get it. It's useless.” Or: “I once told her, and she never forgave me. It really spoiled it all.” Okay, if this is all there is, forget it. The bad breath and snore have successfully strangled our sex life. Truth-telling would be the final blow in our bed.