REKINDLING DESIRE

Part 2/ Session 2

Transcript: How is Eroticism Different Than Sex?

Esther Perel: There was a moment when I was writing "Mating in Captivity" where I had real clarity about the distinction between sexuality and eroticism. I want to share it with you. My husband works in the trauma field. We often joke that he does pain and I do pleasure. Of course, they meet in the middle, you know. I was asking him, "When you work with victims of trauma, when do you know that they're coming back, that they're reconnecting with life? That they are not just dealing with their suffering, and their experience."

Systematically, what came up was our ability to reconnect with pleasure and with playfulness, which of course is creativity. You cannot experience pleasure if you are in a hyper state of vigilance. If you are in a state a dread, or worry, or fear, you cannot be unselfconscious. You cannot be playful. By definition, play and anxiety don't go together.

I began to think about my own community where I grew up. I'm from Antwerp, and I grew up in a community that was essentially made up of holocaust survivors. All families that had survived World War II. In my community, I always observed that there were two groups of people. I see them as the ones who did not die and the ones who came back to life. You can apply this to any trauma, this just happens to be my reference. The people who did not die were people who often lived rather tethered to the ground. Often in fear, vigilance, in a state of distrust. With a sense that the world is a dangerous place so you can never let go of the rigid contraction.

This is a body in fear, right? That state of contraction cannot experience pleasure or connection. It needs to feel safe first. It needs to have the shoulders come down to then be able to lavish in that erotic encounter. What was very clear to me about those people is that pleasure was not possible. It was filled with guilt, and so for their children, for that matter.

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The people who came back to life were people who understood the erotic as an antidote to death, who knew how to keep a sense of aliveness and vitality and vibrancy in the face of adversity. They did it through their imagination, through their hopes, through their dreams, through their games that they played with themselves, through their superstitions. All of that was part of the erotic. Way beyond just sex.

When I see couples who complain about the listlessness of their sex lives, they sometimes may want more sex, but they always want better sex. That better is about this quality of aliveness, this vibrancy, this vitality, this imagination that is essential to the erotic. We could say that a central agent of eroticism is our imagination. In fact, as I say, you don't need the act of sex to have an erotic experience. You just need to hint at sex or envision it, which is probably what many people in incarceration in the camps did all those years when they were deprived of their loved ones.

That set me on the course of working with relationships to re-engage people with the erotic rather than just help you to have more frequent sex. It’s not about performance, not about frequency, but about quality. What is erotic intimacy? Simply put, it's basically when core aspects of yourself are revealed in the sexual space through that language. Often they are aspects that have to do with surrender, with abandon, with power, with control, with tenderness, and with vulnerability.

Erotic intimacy is a space of risk taking and trust. It's a space in which there is a unique quality of communication between two people, sometimes completely nonverbal. It's a space of self revelation and deep knowledge of another. There's a certain nakedness to erotic truth that we cannot get by with the mere spoken language. As Roland Barthes would say, "The words are my civilized, polished self. The body can express truths that can only get hinted at with words."

We are the only creatures who can make love for hours, have a blissful time, even have multiple orgasms, and touch no one. Just because we can imagine it. Any one of you who have been online know what I'm talking about. Eroticism conjures up our imagination in such a way that we don't really have to have sex. We can just hint at sex and have the full experience. Any of you in long distance relationships also know what I'm talking about.

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It's that juice, that power, that dance that exists between two people. You see, today, because we have narrowed the erotic to mere sex, the repertoire of techniques, the biological urges, and the toys, we miss something essential. Basically the erotic is way beyond blatant sexuality. It's not about getting it done. It's about making it last. It's about cultivating the wanting.

Here's what happens in porn, for example. I have nothing specifically against porn, but I want you to understand a distinction. Porn bypasses desire. It aims for instant arousal and gratification. Quick. Done. Finished. The shorter, the better, so you can go to sleep but you've done the job. In the erotic, it is the actual opposite. The point is not to get it done, the point is actually to make you want it, want it, but not get it. That combination of frustration is actually what builds the excitement and the anticipation. That's a plot.

When you meet in the beginning it's easy to have that because it's built into the structure. You don't yet know the person. You don't know if they're going to call. The uncertainties there. You don't have to pretend it. Yeah? The interesting thing is that once we meet our partner, we seem to not want to preserve that space. We want to collapse it. We take all that unknown, mysterious, what's to happen next, surprise, all the stuff that is intrinsic to the erotic and we zap it.

We zap it because we want something cozy. It's wonderful to have cozy, but the people who come to me are often people who have excess cozy and lack of erotic. Let me say some more about eroticism because I think that if I can get you to change your thinking from sex to the erotic, we will be already on a path.

Animals have sex. It's the instinct. It's the biological. It's the natural. Eroticism is sexuality transformed by our human imagination. It's the poetics of sex. In eroticism, it's really cultivating pleasure for its own sake. There is no purpose. There's no babies in eroticism. It's the plot that accompanies it that actually maintains the interest in it. Many people lose the desire in sex. Not because they have lost their sexual desire, but they have lost the desire for the sex they can have. It's not the same.

Eroticism is ceremony, ritual, celebration. It's everything that amps up the excitement, like fantasy. That's why it's the imagination. Typically when we use the word fantasy we think immediately about toys and plots and roles. No. It's really

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anything that heightens the quality of the experience beyond the mere doing and getting it done. It's the daytime, it's the weather, it's the wind, it's the sun, it's the music, it's the senses. It's everything that heightens the experience in the details. The pacing, the rhythm. All of that is part of the erotic.

The way I really began to understand it is that if you go back in history, before we narrowed eroticism as being about sex per se, you'd see that throughout history the mystics looked at eroticism as a quality of aliveness, of vibrancy, of vitality. Of renewal, of connection, of playfulness. All of that. Part of why people lose their interest in sex is because they actually lose the erotic dimension of the sex. That which keeps us curious.

When you think about erotic intimacy, it's that real, very subtle calibration between familiarity and newness. Between the trust of what you can already rely on and the risk taking of what you can still discover. The mystery that still lays around the corner. If it's just about repeating, the foregone conclusion where you know before you start where it will end, for most people, after a year, maybe two, it's pretty much uninteresting.

Eroticism is how you cultivate that plot. That is what has often allowed me to say that foreplay starts at the end of the previous orgasm. It's what creates an energy between two people, or more than two people, that makes you feel sexual. That eroticizes the other, that makes you look at your partner, not just as your best friend and your roommate, it's all of that. That charge around it that then puts you in the mood later on.

Eroticism is like a receptacle for our urges, for our hopes, for our dreams, but also for our wounds and our past memories. It's filled with the details of your childhood. The sensory memory, the sensual details, positive and negative. It's that combination between comfort and edge, between ecstasy and disaster, between mystery and familiarity. In that place, you will find the erotic. You can have it with your partner. People have said to me, "Ah, yeah. You can have this, but you have to go elsewhere because you already know your partner," and all of this. To which of course I have often answered with the question, "can you want what you already have? Yeah? You don't have your partner."

It's an illusion to think that you know them like the inside of your pocket, or vice versa. Once you actually tolerate the mystery in your midst and you know that there's still a whole world, a whole universe of your partner that you haven't yet discovered, then you are in the erotic space.

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