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WILHELM REICH

by Michael Gerber M.D.

Body/mind pioneer Wilhelm Reich asserted that the repression of our natural sexuality was the cause of many diseases and social ills. Emergence of sexual health as a topic of polite and even scholarly conversation has greatly to do with the genius of the psychiatrist, Wilhelm Reich, M.D. Raised as an Austrian Jew at the turn of the last century, he was a star student of Freud but moved far beyond Freudian limitations. Freud always maintained a body-mind duality and adhered to a lengthy therapy system of dream analysis and free association, with the physician being the passive observer and later the object of transference. In psychoanalyzing his patients, however, Reich noticed physical manifestations intimately associated with thoughts and emotions. He began working on his patients' bodies as well as their minds to change their state. Reich improved their breathing and loosened the chronic tension in their muscles. He developed a system of therapy he called Character Analysis and formulated his theory of the function of the orgasm. To Reich, the orgasm was not just for pleasure or procreation but a means to re-equilibrate the entire energy system of the organism, and a requisite for physical and psychic health. Reich felt that due to social conditioning, the vast majority of people were incapable of having a true, or what he called a total, orgasm. He placed the causes of most of society's ills on sexual dysfunction.

Reich began to argue that distorted sexual attitudes and behavior stemmed from the major emphases and characteristics of capitalistic society itself: methods of child rearing and education; patriarchal patterns of family life; rigid moral structure; an authoritarian system of relationships; and alienating modes of work. Forever the iconoclast, Reich started movements of sexual liberation in the late 1920's that were arguably 50 years ahead of their time and popular acceptance. He became a communist in Germany for some years and developed a sexual bill of rights that proposed the abolition of virtually all laws against sexual expression and freedom and included such specifics as the free availability and distribution of contraceptives to all, including teenagers, and sex education programs in the media and in businesses above a certain size.

Later Reich became enormously critical of communism and lost confidence in the left wing's ability to change the system. The fascinating story of Wilhelm Reich has been told in a number of books. For the moment let's concentrate on his perception of the total orgasm. In a total orgasm both partners enjoy the experience of spontaneity and complete surrender. The natural buildup of sexual excitement gives way to a graceful release, like the breaking of an ocean wave or the pulsations of a jellyfish. Ejaculation is smooth, unlike the normal contractions that people experience, which Reich attributed to individuals resisting full release.

In defining this experience, in total orgasm the entire body, not just the narrow pelvic area, becomes physically aroused and charged, and involved in involuntary, rhythmic pulsations. The mind is aware only of the physical sensations of the moment.

Reich defined his concept of orgasmic potency as, "the capacity to surrender to the flow of biological energy, without any inhibition, the capacity for complete discharge of all dammed-up sexual excitation through involuntary, pleasurable contractions of the body." Descriptions of total orgasm always involve the concepts of complete surrender, delicious dissolving and a feeling of oneness with the universe. It is a qualitatively different experience than normal sex.

According to Reich, however, total orgasm can only happen if two partners can express their love to each other through mutual giving and surrender. A second requirement for full orgasm is that both partners be sufficiently free of "armor" for their bodies to function as clear channels for the unimpeded flow of energy and excitement.

Armor is the storage of unresolved conflicts' "frozen history" of grief, anger, rage or fear which are repeatedly blocked from expression. This chronic repression can be stored in the musculature of the shoulders, back, chest, neck, face, pelvis and other parts of the body. Throughout his life Reich emphasized the necessity for the gradual dissolution of the armor. If done too rapidly it can precipitate highly disturbing memories such as feelings of abandonment and even panic. In the full orgasm, breathing is of central importance. During therapy, Reich had observed that virtually all his patients breathed in a shallow jerky or tense manner. Shallow breathing, he believed, functions physiologically to cut off deep feeling of any kind. In the sex act, breathing should become deeper, more rhythmic than normal and pleasurable in itself. Shortly before orgasm, both sexes should experience deep, current-like sensations running up and down their bodies. Reich termed these "streamings."

If these conditions are not met and the energy flow is blocked, several consequences follow. The climax will be localized in the loins. Pleasure from foreplay and climax will quickly evaporate, and instead of deep satisfaction a sense of emptiness or fatigue can take over. Reich saw that the ability to lose ourselves wholly in the sexual embrace is the fundamental sign of emotional, physical and sexual well-being. Thus, for Reich the power of sex is not to be found in the orgasm per se, but in completely entering into the enjoyment of the present.

Reich called those people for whom the complete orgasm was a frequent or regular occurrence--as opposed to a once- or twice-in-a-lifetime experience--genital characters. They possess true emotional and physical health. He noted that anyone who is tense and immersed in fantasies or fretful thoughts during

intercourse cannot be fully alive to the experience. So he maintained that the ability to enjoy a complete orgasm is a sure indicator of one's capacity to be truly spontaneous in life, to love in general, and to be emotionally and physically sensitive to the world at large.

It is important to see that Reich was not advocating sexual intercourse for its own sake or claiming that orgasm was the point of existence. Rather, orgasmic potency was conceived of as an important criterion of full emotional health.

Reich frequently referred to the pulse of life. He recognized that everything in the universe pulsates, from amoebas to stars. Everything continually expands and contracts according to a natural rhythm. This is a basic expression of existence, inextricably involved with the overall life process of every organism. In humans, each of our organs and all of our biological and emotional functions expand and contract--the beating of our heart, the inhalation and exhalation of our lungs, even our inward and outward moods are all governed by this fundamental mechanism. Chronic armoring prevents pulsation; total orgasm dissolves the tensions and rebalances, or re-equilibrates, the overall energy flow of the body. In his later years Reich felt that sexuality itself might be a tremendously powerful spiritual force. He seemed to see the full orgasmic experience as possessing a tremendous transforming power, capable of shattering an individual's feeling of isolation and alienation from the world.

Essentially he was suggesting that the full orgasmic experience has the capacity to change, perhaps permanently, our daily human consciousness. He asserted that it is through the sexual orgasm that man and woman most closely experience the oneness with the cosmos that all religions speak of. In fact, the descriptions of surrender, peace, bliss and oneness associated with total orgasm correspond exactly with people's description of ecstatic religious experiences.

For this type of thinking and concepts such as orgone energy (universal bioenergy) and bions (fundamental energy units), Reich managed to alienate the political, scientific and medical establishments of his day. He was imprisoned for distributing medical equipment across state lines (orgone boxes which accumulate the orgone energy for healing purposes) in 1956 and died in prison in 1957, two days before his parole hearings. The government also burned all of his books and destroyed most of his laboratory. His life and ideas have influenced many later teachers and schools of philosophy and health including virtually all Western body/mind disciplines. Reich's theories also parallel many concepts in Ayurveda and Chinese medicine.

Sources:

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Conceptual Biography of Wilhelm Reich. William Edward Mann. j. P. Tarcher, Inc 1980.

Reichian-inspired work is currently being performed at the Orgone Biophysical Research Lab in Oregon: P.O. Box 1148, Ashland, OR 97520. Website: id.mind.net/community/orgonelab/index.htm

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