

# LOVE WORTH MAKING

HOW TO HAVE  
RIDICULOUSLY  
GREAT SEX  
IN A LONG-LASTING  
RELATIONSHIP

*Stephen Snyder, M.D.*

# Rules of the Heart

*The rules of desire are rules of the heart.*

*“Sex is emotion in motion.”*

—MAE WEST

It's a hot summer afternoon on the New York subway. I'm bringing my children and a few of their friends back to Manhattan on the B train after a long day at Brighton Beach.

There's a young couple standing near the exit door sharing an iPod headset—tethered together, each with an earpiece in one ear. She's leaning against the wall, sweat-soaked in a T-shirt and shorts. He's a few inches shorter, wearing sandals, beach clothes, and long hair. His hands are resting lightly on her hips. Her arms are draped over his shoulders.

They seem entirely absorbed in the music, the motion of the subway car, and each other. Their eyes, half shut, are out of focus, dreamy. They're both wearing goofy, crooked smiles—as if sharing some silly secret. They look as if they might easily miss their stop.

Amid the noise of the children and the rocking and bouncing of the subway car, it would be easy for this couple to pass unnoticed. But there is something about them that holds my attention. A certain aura.



It's sex, of course.

Their goofy smiles, their dreamy manner. Definitely sex.

They're fully clothed, standing up, and doing nothing obviously improper, but definitely enjoying a long moment of arousal on the way home from the beach.

Turning away self-consciously, I realize I'm not the only one watching this couple. The young children are oblivious, of course. But the adults in the car are all clearly aware of what's going on. Everyone is stealing glances at them, transfixed by the same sexual vibration.

Their aura is now general throughout the subway car. I fear we will all miss our stops.



Sexual arousal, if all goes according to nature's plan, makes us dumb and happy, absorbed and distracted. We arrive somewhere far uptown, having missed all our stops—deeply pleased but with no idea where we are.

Most of us learn that to succeed in a fast-paced world we don't really have time for arousal. Many modern couples hurry through sex without letting themselves get very aroused—then wonder where their sexual magic has gone. Others do their best to hold on to the inspiration that brought them together, but lose it amid the distractions and responsibilities of ordinary adult life.

Eros seems more designed to get you *into* a relationship than to keep you happy once you're already there. This young couple quietly rocking near the exit door—if they stay together, what will their lovemaking be like years from now, when they're the ones lugging kids' swim toys back from the beach?

Looking around the subway car, I find myself wondering about the sex lives of my fellow passengers. Who's having good sex, and

who isn't? Who's faking it, and whose bedroom is still a sanctuary of delight?

Our intimate lives are conducted almost entirely in secret. No one except you and your partner really know what your erotic life is like—unless one of you tells, of course. And even then, things often get lost in translation.

Some people know intuitively how to cultivate a vibrant erotic relationship. But many don't. Which is unfortunate, since it's actually not that hard—once you know what you're doing.

### A Funny Story

One day in sixth grade, my daughter came home from school with a funny story. Her teacher had been going around the room asking each student what her parents did for a living.

When it came my daughter's turn to tell about me, she said I was a psychiatrist. Whereupon her best friend seated behind her shouted, "*He's a sex therapist!*"

The class went wild.

A few minutes later, when all the shouting and excitement had died down, one classmate whispered aloud the inevitable question . . .

"*What does he . . . DO?*"

There was much wonderment, horror, and giggling.

It's a good question, really. Since 1978, when the American Association of Sex Educators, Counselors, and Therapists (AASECT) prohibited nudity and physical touch in the office, it's assumed that all we do is talk. For the most part that's true.

We talk about sex, of course. But we talk even more about feelings. Spend enough time as a sex therapist, and before long you're either doing psychotherapy or you haven't been paying attention.

Sometimes when I'm asked "What does a sex therapist do?" I'm tempted to give a much simpler answer. One that I'm sure would

have been both a relief and a disappointment to my daughters' classmates:

*Mostly I listen to people tell me about bad sex.*

In my thirty years of practice, I've heard about more bad sex than you can possibly imagine. In fact, by now I feel I can without exaggeration claim to be one of the world's foremost experts on bad sex.

I know that sounds like a dubious honor. But being an expert on bad sex can be really useful. Listening to people tell me about bad sex for so many years has left me with a deeper understanding about what makes for *good sex*—and even *great sex*.

## The Rules of Desire

Good sex follows certain rules. The same is true for great sex.

Some people know these rules intuitively, but many don't. I know this for a fact because every day in my office I see couples who have no idea such rules even exist.

Most therapists don't know these rules either. For example, I'll sometimes hear a colleague remark that sex is simply "friction plus fantasy." Sexual excitement, they say, happens when you combine the right kind of physical stimulation with the right kind of mental activity.

This tells me right away that my colleague is unaware of the rules.

I have nothing against friction and fantasy. But if that's all you're getting, then you've been short-changed.

Good friction is nice—and certainly better than bad friction. But friction doesn't really do the trick—as anyone who's ever had really boring sex with a really skilled partner can tell you.

Think back to the most memorable sexual experience of your life. (If you've never yet *had* a really memorable sexual experience, relax. You're in good company.) What you remember probably isn't how wonderful the friction was.

The rules I have in mind don't involve sexual friction.

How about the *fantasy* part of the "friction plus fantasy" equa-

tion? There's very little that happens to us humans without our automatically adding to it from our store of memories, dreams, and associations. So of course we fantasize during sex as well.

We may or may not go so far as to imagine alternate partners in bed, but one would have to search hard for examples of sex where fantasy was entirely absent.

The power of fantasy tends to be fleeting though. The mind is a restless consumer, always looking for something new and wondering, "Is that all there is?"

The rules I have in mind don't involve sexual fantasy either.

## A Hidden Realm

Somewhere beyond "friction plus fantasy" is a realm where sexuality connects us to each other and to the deepest parts of ourselves. It's a place where sex feeds and is fed by love.

This is the most personal aspect of sex. In all the many books that have been written on lovemaking, you'll find precious little written about it.

It's no mystery why. This aspect of sex is not an easy subject. But this "sex of the heart" is an essential subject if you want to understand lovemaking.

It's in this realm of sex of the heart that we'll find the hidden rules we're seeking.

Most of us feel this more personal erotic feeling somewhere in our chests. Hence, by tradition, "heart." A more precise term, though lacking in physical resonance, might be "sex of the self."

Unlike friction and fantasy, this part of sex can't be bought, sold, marketed, or packaged as a commodity. It is simply a gift to be received. Its proper accompanying emotion is not really desire, or lust—but rather simply gratitude, or perhaps awe.

This kind of sex can't be produced simply by following a recipe. So it's no accident that few how-to books on sex concern themselves much with it.

Sex becomes truly special either of its own volition, or not at all. But we can help nurture the conditions for it to flourish, once we know what those conditions are.

## Some Open Secrets About Sexual Arousal

In the late 1950s, William Masters and Virginia Johnson became the first scientists to examine the physical aspects of human sexual response in any detail. But many of these physical signs had already been closely observed—less scientifically but no less intensely—by millions of sexual couples since the dawn of human self-awareness.

Most couples study the male partner's erections and the female partner's state of lubrication carefully, for information about whether the other person is "really aroused." Urban legends rise and fall concerning other supposed indicators (see "nipple erection," "pupil dilation"). But this is all still limited to physical arousal.

The *psychological* aspects of arousal are more important. But they've yet to find their Masters and Johnson.

Fortunately, your own feelings can be a quite accurate guide to how excited you are—if you know what to look for.

Here's my short list of the most important psychological changes that happen when you get aroused.

### Attention

When you're aroused, sex grabs your attention. You stop thinking about bills, worries, responsibilities—your entire portfolio of ordinary concerns. Your time sense may get a little messed up. (Sexually aroused people tend to arrive late to meetings.)

If someone gave you an IQ test during peak arousal, you wouldn't do too well on it. The tester might have a hard time getting you to pay attention to the questions. Good sex definitely makes you dumber. And great sex can make you downright stupid.

## Regression

Sexual excitement puts you into a more primitive and selfish state of mind. It makes you less patient, less forgiving. You don't tolerate frustration very well. You become somewhat immature. (Okay, sometimes *a lot* immature!)

If the phone rings during lovemaking, you don't care who's calling, or what they want. You may feel very close to your partner, but it's a selfish kind of closeness. You're not really interested in listening to the details of how their day went. You just want them to give you their complete attention, and to tell you how wonderful you are.

## Validation

Arousal feels special. Validating. Good sex makes us feel good about ourselves. That's how we know it's good sex.

With good lovemaking, we have a feeling of "Yes, that's me. Here I am. You found me." We feel in touch with our deepest, most authentic selves.

It's a grateful feeling. "Yes, you found me. The *me* of me. Thank you for finding me. Thank you for bringing me home to where I really live."

When couples come to my office, I always try to find out whether they've been really getting aroused. Not just hard, or lubricated. But really *aroused*. Captivated. Absorbed. *Self-absorbed*. Goofy. I like to hear a few giggles.

## How to Use This Book

You'll find the rules I've been referring to at the beginning of every chapter, in italics. At the top of Chapter 2, for instance: *The sexual self is very honest, but its vocabulary is limited.*

Occasionally you'll find them other places in the text as well.

If you skim a few of them, you'll notice they're less like rules of conduct and more like the law of gravity. They're not so much to be followed as to be understood.



Feel free to go ahead and break them. But if you do, please write me and tell me how you did it.

This is not a conventional “how-to” book. It contains no exercises, and it has few formulas saying “first do this, then do that.”

This is intentional. As we’ll see later, eros doesn’t like to be told what to do. If you set a goal, your sexual mind will be happy to reject it. It’s kind of childish and brilliant that way.

You also won’t find much about sexual biology or neurochemistry on these pages. Sex books these days tend to be full of advice for “boosting your dopamine”—or your oxytocin, or some other such nonsense. In all my thirty years as a sex therapist, I’ve yet to see a dopamine molecule walk into my office.

We’ll stick with things you can see and feel yourself, without needing a laboratory.

I’ll also spare you the body diagrams. You already know what a penis and vagina look like, right? And we won’t discuss how many neurons are concentrated in your clitoris. It’s an impressive number, but who really cares?

There are a few great sex books already out there, and I’ll point them out to you as we go along. But reading most of the others is like gnawing on dry bones. As my friend and colleague Paul Joannides, the author of *Guide to Getting It On* (one of the aforementioned great ones), has accurately noted, “the trouble with most books on sex is they don’t get anyone hard or wet.”

This book is not intended to get you hard or wet. But it’s meant not to get in your way either. The chapters are short, so you can read them even if you get a little distracted. Hey, I *hope* you get a little distracted.

There are no lists to memorize, and there won’t be a test afterward. We’re dealing with a part of the human mind that hasn’t gone to school yet, and never will.

Any questions?

Okay, let’s get started . . .