
Vasumati Hancock:

'We are caught between a need to protect and a need to expand. That's confusing.'

(Interview door Paul Houkes, nieuwsbrief SBLP april 2023, over de therapeutentraining 'Werken met seksualiteit', 24 t/m 28 mei, Aumm Instituut.)

Everyone has to deal with survival, a place to live, enough money to live on, and work, a job, some kind of employment. But outside of that, the main thing that people are busy with, it's not their spiritual life, it's their emotional, sexual, romantic life that takes up a lot of their inner bandwidth, takes up their space. And when you really look into it, a lot of what people deal with is unresolved patterns or attachment issues from the family, from the childhood that recycle in later adult relationships.

This is always quite difficult because these early patterns are like imprints in the psyche that you don't see because they're not necessarily visible. But they become a pattern out of which you either are attracted to someone or you attract someone to you and how you feel about yourself, if you feel that you are worth love, if you feel that you are confident, and if you feel that you are allowed to enjoy life and to have pleasure in sexuality, you know, there are so many negative carryovers from the early culture, from religion, from the society, and from the family.

If we don't really understand what they are, where they come from, how they got there, then we are always finding ourselves somehow stuck. And we've been over and over for the next relation, etc.

And the repeating the pattern is really hard because, okay, once or twice, you make some wrong choice or you attract it to a person who isn't good for you. And then that relationship runs its course. And then you do it again, you see. And you think, "Did I do this again? I was sure I will try for something different."

And that's the point where the work really becomes interesting: what is so stuck in me that I keep repeating this? It's really interesting because when we have trauma, what we want to do is protect, is shut everything down. So nothing becomes overwhelming and we can manage our emotions, our energy. Sexuality and intimacy requires the opposite, that we open up, that we expand.

So we are caught between a need to protect and a need to expand. That's confusing.

And it's very scary because when you start expanding, if you have trauma, you become quite insecure. You feel afraid, anxious. But then if you don't expand, then somehow you feel stuck. And there are all these issues from our past that are influencing this system.

You know, the level of sexual abuse you really start looking into it is very high. And there's a new definition of sexual abuse. It doesn't always mean that something happened to your body. It more means something happened to your personal sense of boundaries. Because it's very confusing.

People know that something happened, but they can't always say exactly this and this happened in this and this environment with this and this person. They only know that there was something that felt wrong.

And that's the difficulty because often the memory has been so compromised, because these events were either when the person was very young or often sexual abuse is when you observe somebody else being abused and you experience it as if it were happening to you, which is what they call the secondary victim, which is no less damaging.

Most of the time, people don't know this, but it starts to come up when the system starts to expand, when they're in a relationship.

And suddenly people who have not been aware of this come close to someone and then they start having thoughts, or maybe memories come up, or they have dreams, and they go, "Wow, maybe I was abused", because we live in an environment of patriarchal culture where the feminine has not been equally valued to the masculine.

Part of the patriarchal culture is that men have the power, women do not have the power, and men can do what they like with women, and women can't refuse.

And what was very interesting in the last two years is suddenly the #MeToo movement, that women are saying, "Wait. This is not okay. Time's up. It's over. We have to call these things." And so many women then felt, "Ah, now I have the support."

But you know, one thing we haven't really said clearly is it looks as if the patriarchy works for men and is damaging to women. But it's not true because as long as the patriarchy values power, control, lack of emotion, men are getting messed up too because those men can't feel they don't know how to connect, they can't feel their hearts, they're too scared.

These men have difficulty fathering, they have difficulty being real partners, because for those things you have to open your heart, you have to be vulnerable. And our culture trashes vulnerability, doesn't help people. And so therefore it's not only on a sexual level, it's also on the level of emotional availability.

Much of the time the people that come in are relationships where one person wants to be emotionally vulnerable and intimate. And the other person has no idea and doesn't want it and actually feels threatened by it. But these are really, really difficult because those people have a life, they've raised children, they have a role, they know each other well, they don't want to give it up, but nobody's happy.

Generally, why do people come for couples therapy? That's where we start. Many people go on with their lives. A lot of people manage it by having a double life, by having affairs, but at a certain point there is something comes up and the couple doesn't manage on their own.

Maybe one person has an affair. Maybe one person threatens to leave. Maybe there's an illness or an accident. And the relationship has a crisis and they come in for therapy. And that's the point where I try to teach therapists: what do you do? The first thing is you have to have a very open mind.

The therapist has to be able to empathize with both, but take sides with neither. Because every relationship is so complex, you know, and then you have to understand that much of what's happening is that each person is bringing their childhood to the present moment.

So then you have to help people to see what are they bringing. And you do this by direct questioning. Can you tell me a little bit about your childhood? What was your relation like with your father? What was your relation like with your mother? Or what did you learn about love in your family? Because often it's not so much what the father did.

So a real good therapist understands that the issues are complex, that we have to look into the family of both. And a lot of couple therapy does that and it never works because they're there for a reason. So then you look, what are the relations with the parents on both sides? And what was the messaging in the family about love, about needs, about boundaries?

Often these are the unspoken messages. And often these lead to different expectations that are never spoken. But if I have an expectation and it's not fulfilled, I will feel betrayed and angry or hurt. So a lot of the time then you have to clarify, well, what do you expect from each other? What do you expect from yourself? And then how realistic is this and then once you decoded the situation.

And then each relationship is a tremendous opportunity for growth, either for individual growth or for the couple growth. And sometimes that growth means we really need to separate. Not all. I really try to see: can people stay together in a co-creative way, in a way that doesn't keep them both stuck and limited and codependent? That's the first thing I'll try.

Now let's say there's an affair. Let's say there was so much lack of intimacy in the marriage. one person has an affair. So then you say, okay, can you bring that intimacy somehow back to your marriage? Sometimes an affair opens up conversations that were simply not possible or too scary to have before.

So we never judge an affair. We never say, oh, this person is betrayed. We say: this person had needs that could not be met in that connection.

I don't think an affair is necessarily something that has to destroy a relationship. Yes, there brings up a lot of difficult feelings. If a couple can work on it, sometimes they can heal and get better and sometimes not.

So healing a couple doesn't always mean making people stay together. It says you try to see: can people stay together in a healthy way or if they cannot?

If there's direct abuse, you know, one of the interesting things is a lot of abuse gets acted out in relationships. And why? It's because as children we were so deprived of our needs. And this wounded child has never been dealt with. We may be 50 years old in the body, but five years old, infant, young, as a consciousness.

And then when you're in a relationship and somebody doesn't give you your needs, or they deny you sexually, or you feel they don't see you, you will go crazy. Suddenly that child who's so angry, whose needs were so not seen will explode. So a lot of the time it's working with a very young part of our personality that is really deprived and wounded and mistrustful.

So it's interesting and you have to be very willing to just listen. You can't come into this with a fixed idea. This is bad and this is good and this is what you need to do. There's no formula. That's why it's so challenging for therapists.

Let's say that all of us have some kind of sexual trauma and it can be big traumas and it can be small traumas. And whenever there's trauma, there's a need to protect and to constrict the system.

So a relationship with awareness can become a place to heal that trauma. Maybe you never know exactly where that trauma comes from, but it comes out in fear of intimacy, fear of sexuality, the need to control or sexual dysfunctions. The body will just do things. You may have an inability to keep an erection or a woman doesn't easily enjoy penetration or all kinds of things. And instead of then just letting people feel bad about themselves, you help them to see what's there was trauma.

And what do you need? Maybe you need to go much more slowly. you need to say when you feel afraid. And no one is taught this. People are taught that sexuality has to look like this. And if you can't do that, there's something wrong with you. It's a horrible pressure, just a horrible pressure.

So the first thing is you have to take off the pressure and start from the beginning, just what feels good? Where can I meet that I feel safe and there's so much about communication, about safety.

And that's why we try to help people by teaching them to be present, because when your trauma comes up, you dissociate, it is so difficult to fully be present. So a lot of the work has a little bit of mindfulness, a little bit of the work we learned from this somatic experiencing and all other trauma work, which is slow down. Be present to your body, because so many people can do sex, they can perform, and they don't feel anything. They don't feel anything. They don't connect, or they can do something, and they can, you know, fantasize or imagine something, they're with a partner, but they're not actually connected with that partner.

And then if they connect with that partner, then sexually the system shuts down, because they can't bring sex and heart together. The minute the heart comes, there's some intimacy fear, and we don't want to face that. So we speed up and we run over that, because it brings up so much insecurity and vulnerability.

It's normal, let's say, it's more normal than being a good sexual performer. And we think there's only pressure on women, but there's enormous pressure on men to seduce, to attract, to do a good sexual performance. And what about a man's vulnerability?

You know, is he good? Is he big? Is he enough? Does he last long enough? And then the woman always have to please the man. They don't, they feel like if I please him sexually, he will love me. So they already are not with themselves. They're gone.

And then of course, after a while, you don't enjoy that because you're not really true to yourself. Then eventually, that kind of sex doesn't last. So there are big, big issues. And of course, there's so much pornography, there's so much over excited sexuality everywhere. It also makes relationship intimate sex difficult.

So how we do it is we get people to do inquiry where, you know, if a therapist can understand themselves and their partner in a loving and non-judgmental way, and they have their own inner wisdom, they understand themselves, it's so much easier to understand other people. You have a more intuitive and more intimate understanding of the terrain of what people go through. And if you've done it yourself and done your own work and investigated your own relationships, which is your wound, is it abandonment, is it manipulation and control, you will have so much more space.

The part of a training is to do some personal work. And part of the training is to take situations and set up little groups where the participants give each other sessions. We learn a few techniques, we learn how to ask questions, we learn which themes we want to focus on, we learn a way of listening to what people say, to see what's behind what they're saying. And then we find different methods, different interventions.

How should we bring this into the open? Sometimes we do parts work, we look at the different parts of a person. Sometimes we'll do energetic work if they shut down. Sometimes we'll simply do trauma work if they're so frightened and they're dissociating, then all we'll do is help people to be present, help them come into the body.

Most of the people who work with Aumm have quite a bit of trauma skill. They have quite a bit of inner child knowledge. They understand the wounds, they understand the family. And we have quite already a lot of skills in our toolbox. The question is when to use it and when not to.

And when they're in their interaction to point out which parts of their interaction are destructive, are unconscious, and which parts of their interaction actually open them up and bring healing, what's possible, because sometimes people don't know, they have their loops, they keep repeating this loop.

Then you deal also with commitment issues, with issues about honesty, you know, a lot of times couples, especially children who were controlled in their sexuality, and who were really not allowed to develop themselves, when those people become adults, they will have a double personality. They'll have learned as a child to keep a whole secret life. They never tell anyone because in the family, there was the only way they could be an individual.

So you have to sometimes see especially very moralistic more families that had a strict judgments around sexuality, then the child will split. There'll be a lot of pretending to be one thing and actually being another. And those are hard patterns because they don't trust that anyone will love them if they really know who they are.

You know, 20 years ago, we didn't know about trauma work. The amount of benefit that we have got from having a trauma informed approach to therapy, and there are many different types of trauma work, is immense. It's just phenomenal what it's given us. It's changed our therapy

because trauma is a way of slowing down, but it also brings mindfulness. There's no healing trauma without mindfulness.

So as trauma work came in, so did mindfulness, somatic mindfulness, which is very close to meditation. You are learning to be aware, learning to be present, learning to be sense. That's all meditation, learning your breath, learning the subtleties of the body.

So I'm excited by that and I'm excited because ultimately it has a spiritual dimension. It brings you closer to yourself, closer to your inner being, trusting of just who you are, more grounded, more centered. It has an enormous value, not just therapeutically.