

Finding peace with myself and the jaws of hell . . .

AFRAID OF THE DARK

TALKING WITH OUR CHILDREN ABOUT SEX

By Stephen Carter



Several years ago at church, our bishop rounded up all the adults and sat us down in the chapel. Turns out it was time for “the talk.”

Our bishop was a very kind and sensitive person. He took the job of

keeping his congregation on the straight and narrow with the utmost seriousness. I’m certain that he put everything he had into his calling. That day, he was worried about the youth.

His words to us were very quotable: “If there’s an unsupervised Internet connection, there’s a pornography problem.” “I take the women’s underwear ads out of the newspaper before bringing it in the house.” “Our children should have no privacy in our homes.”

He endorsed (and exemplified) the practice of going through our children’s rooms, bureau drawers, mattresses, closets — anywhere that they could be hiding girly magazines or those endlessly propagating underwear ads. He admonished us to leave no temptation festering in any corner of the house, lest our youth be drawn into sin.

“Imagine you’ve been fasting all day,” he said, “and there’s a cream puff sitting on the counter. You’re going to be tempted.”

My wife leaned over to me and said, “Sounds like there’s a lot of hunger going on.”

She said this just as a lot of old feelings came swimming to the surface. I was a teenager all over again, aboil with hormones and unable to sleep, afraid that I would die during the night and wake up in flames.

I’m almost embarrassed that I was so certain I was going to hell, because as I’ve talked with other males my same age, it seems that my adolescence was much the same as anyone

else’s. My wife had thought my teenage angst was pretty neurotic, blowing things out of proportion. But that day she got an earful of what I grew up with: leaders who saw Satan simmering in my darkest places.

So I wondered: why does so much of the Church discourse I’ve experienced on teenage sexual desire connect sex to Satan? Why do we invariably place it in the realm of the dark and forbidden? It seems that we Mormons simply assume that if someone is going into a dark place, they must be sinning. After all, in Lehi’s dream the landscape around the tree of life was dark, and those who wandered into it were lost.

What’s in the darkness? Will it really swallow us up forever? It’s a question that has bothered me for a long time, so I’ve been doing an experiment with the dark.

FOR MOST OF my life, I was certain that R-rated movies were a scourge to humankind, a doorway to hell. I believed this because my church had brought me up on the “poison” metaphor, the idea that books, pictures, and movies are like lead: once they get inside your system, they poison you, and there’s no way to get them back out. “The mind through which filth passes is never the same,” quoth Ezra Taft Benson.¹

However, during graduate school, I started to study screenwriting and found out that there were some R-rated movies that seemed to have no clue how debauched they were. I was struck by the power of their stories and their depth of moral vision. Of course, I had read only their screenplays; who knew what watching the actual movie would do to me! But, I was intrigued by the possibilities in these stories. I thought they might have something to offer me. So, taking my eternal soul in my hands, I ventured into the darkness of the movie theater.

I’ll never forget the sense of moral pulverization and renewal I felt when I saw *Seven*, *Monster*, and *Requiem for a Dream*. Or how deeply I felt I could see into the battlefields and sanctuaries of family life in *Ordinary People* and *You Can Count On Me*. Or the way *Kadosh* and *Heaven* dredged up startling alternative visions of spirituality.

I noticed that in the best movies I saw, the story broke me into a million pieces, exploding my perceptions and tearing



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my morality up by its roots, showing me in the turn of a beautifully constructed climax that the world is bigger than I had thought it was.

Why did it take me so long to see how much my soul needed these stories? I think it is partially because I believed that when a scene came that had material my church didn't condone, the movie had challenged me, saying, "If you let this go by, you tacitly accept the morality I have just presented. You agree to let it become a part of you, and when it becomes a part of you, you will start to see the world under my influence." In other words, I saw a movie's audience as a crowd of gaping mouths that would indiscriminately consume anything that flitted across the screen. The only way to stop our mouths from sucking in everything the movie threw at us was to turn the movie off or leave the room.

But now I'm developing a new theory. Movies are storytellers, not hypnotists. They present their vision of the world, but I get to decide what I, the viewer, think of it. Movies are metaphors about life; through them I can see the world from a different perspective, and I can approach any idea or image the movie presents from many different directions. But at no time can the story make a claim upon me unless I allow it to. In other words, I eat only what I want.

I had some help developing this skill. Eugene England was the first person I heard who questioned the poison metaphor, and a few of my more liberal Mormon friends pointed me toward movies they admired. But from official Church channels, I got only worried glances at my temple recommend.

IT'S POSSIBLE THAT many Mormon teenagers find themselves in the same difficulty I did when I began my excursion into R-rated movies. They have been thrust into a "dark" place: a budding awareness of sexual desires. It isn't something they choose, but they're forced to deal with it. Right now, as far as I have been able to see, official Church channels classify anything related to sex and teenagers as sinful. If sex is discussed

with the youth, it is discussed only in negatively charged terms. I certainly understand that engaging in sexual relations is a complex endeavor and often accompanied by more consequences than the uninitiated might expect. So I can see why we'd hesitate to let young people loose in such a charged area.

For myself, the fear of hell (plus an unfortunate skin condition) kept me from having sex before I was married. Even though I'm glad I waited, I realize now that I was ruled by fear. To me, sex was a mythical state inhabited by goddesses; it was a heaven on earth, a fruit desirable above all other things. But it was ensconced within the darkest of places. If I went anywhere near it, my Church leaders taught, I would be committing a sin second only to murder. Can you believe it? I was attracted to the second worst sin in the universe! I fantasized about it. I wanted it more than anything. Only my ugliness and fear of damnation kept me from partaking of the fires of the flesh.

But the fear worked. I didn't have sex till I was married. Is there something to be said for that? There probably is. But I have another story. It's about my brother. He has a child out of wedlock, a bitter divorce, and a heart of gold.

He told me about it one night many years afterwards, undeniable wisdom in his voice. He told me about a rave he attended and a line of tequilas he downed, not understanding their potency. He woke up the next morning in bed with a girl he didn't remember even meeting. That's how it all

started: my brother thrusting himself into a dark place, a place defined by his church culture only as sinful. The Church and his parents, feeling their responsibility to raise him well, warned him about those places and kept him as far away from them as possible. So he had only one context from which to approach that dark place. The context of sin. And a bit of exploratory sin was sounding good to him at the time. He was trying to forge his own identity, separate from his parents. And the rave was one place free from their influence.

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THE SIMONAC POPE BY WILLIAM BLAKE

But he didn't know how to navigate skillfully through that context. "I wish I had known how hard tequilas kick," he said. "I didn't want to get *that* drunk." My brother was not seeking debauchery; he was merely hungry. I know what that hunger feels like. On its basic level, it's a hunger for sex and highs. But perhaps these hungers, though potent in themselves, are metaphors, just as the movies I saw were metaphors for something larger. I wonder if they don't represent a hunger for meaning beyond the banalities of life, for entry into mythic states, into heaven? But how can we understand the meanings of the metaphors if we never go near them?

Dante got to heaven only through hell. But my brother had no Virgil to guide him.

MY SONS ARE ten and eight years old. I love them. I want them to be happy and make constructive decisions. They aren't teenagers yet, but judging by how quickly they have grown so far, they will be soon. Their hunger will stir, and the great myths of body and spirit will approach them veiled, offering to show them unexplored lands. I want to know how to guide my boys.

My bishop saw Satan lurking around his beloved children. He saw them as if standing at the edge of the clearing around the tree of life, the mists of darkness crawling toward them. Easy prey for the devil.

What's in the darkness?

In the movie *Sixth Sense*, written and directed by M. Night Shyamalan, a young boy named Cole is visited by spirits in various states of dismemberment or disgorgement. Understandably, he's disturbed. No one wants to get up at night to find a woman with the back of her head blasted off raiding the refrigerator. He's similarly distressed by the hanging corpses he has to make his way past at school. But his mentor, Dr. Malcolm Crowe, starts to wonder if these dark spirits aren't trying to tell Cole something. He encourages Cole to stand his ground, despite his perfectly sensible fears, and listen to the spirits. As it turns out, they do have something to communicate.

Ringu, a Japanese horror film recently remade in America as *The Ring*, has a similar theme. In it, a reporter investigating a series of mysterious deaths realizes that each victim had watched a particular videotape one week before his or her



The places that disturb us most are the ones we need to explore.

THE GARDEN OF EARTHLY DELIGHTS BY HIERONYMUS BOSCH

death. The reporter herself watches the tape, as does her son. Afterwards they are both visited by a dark spirit, informing them of their upcoming demise.

By the end of the movie, the reporter finds out that the only way to remove the curse of the haunted videotape is to make a copy of it and pass it on to someone else, who is in turn

infected by the curse and must make a copy of the tape for another person. Though the film doesn't explain how the original tape was made (it couldn't have added to the suspense to show a ghost working long hours at the video editing machine), we learn that the ghost of a murdered girl wants her story told. She wants people to remember her and know how she died. Though she isn't very forgiving of people who don't understand her obscure request, we should certainly be able understand her impulse.

In these stories, the way you rid yourself of the curse and make peace with the threatening spirits is not to cast them out through the priesthood—or to repent and turn to a higher power. It is to turn to the source of the curse—to acknowledge the dark spirits and come into communication with them. Their stories aren't always pleasant, but they're often necessary.

A mentor once told me, "The places that disturb most are the ones we need to explore."

I KNOW WHAT it's like to grow up inhabited by a dark, unspoken hunger. It terrified me. It probably scared my parents and my church leaders as well. This hunger remained dark, it remained in the context of sin, and consequently, I was certain of my damnation. I've had only the beginnings of an autodidactic education on how to explore dark places skillfully. But the darkness of dealing with sexual desire before marriage is a place I never learned to navigate.

All I have to go on is my own experience. And experience tells me that I don't want my children to grow up afraid of the dark. I don't mean to turn them into bats or owls or another creature of the night. But perhaps we can learn a part of the language together so we can converse with the darkness and become acquainted with the night.

Because it will come.



NOTE

1. Ezra Taft Benson, "To the 'Youth of the Noble Birthright,'" *Ensign*, May 1986.