

Crone Sex

by Pat Hanson



Does Everything Change?

Scene on a recent birthday card: two conservatively dressed silver-haired women are sitting in an empty theater. "I hate sex in the movies," one says to the other. "Yes, the seat always folds up and my popcorn spills all over the floor!" her girlfriend replies.

Is this how we crones will treat sexuality in the future? The Crone part of me certainly hopes so as I contemplate the view from my window where newly turned and brilliant gold, amber, and red leaves of autumn flutter to the ground. At their source, leaves mulch into nature's continuous mobius strip that signifies life and death, and provide an apt metaphor for our sexuality.

Do falling leaves signal an annoying seasonal chore — to be swept out of gutters, disposed of by ear-shattering backpack blowers, or left to rot and die on the lawn under a blanket of snow for months, even years? Can leaves instead be welcomed, reminding us of spontaneous childhood squeals of delight as we rolled in deep piles of leaves? Can we notice the beauty and sensuality that still exists in leaves' changed form? Our perspective on "then"

and "now" either enriches or diminishes our experience of the autumn and winter seasons of sexuality.

Sex-positive since childhood, an adolescent and young adult in the "if it felt good you did it '60s," I "followed my bliss" to teach and write about this fundamental aspect of our lives as my career 40-plus years ago. Hardly ever without a partner for very long, I am blessed to be the epitome of the expression: "If you use it, you won't lose it." Now, in the fifteenth year of my third marriage to someone I call my "significant equal," sexuality for me has deepened, grown richer over time. In my attempts to describe sex now, I use concepts like "elusive," "ethereal," "spiritual," and "the interconnectedness of everything."

I am pleased to report that, for many of us, our sexuality seems to have evolved in the same manner. We are the first generations in history to enjoy the benefits of long-term scientific research on who did what with whom, and exactly what happens physically when we engage in sex. From Alfred Kinsey's groundbreaking

FINDINGS FROM 2007 STUDY OF SEX AND SENIORS

- “Only” 13% of men and 35% of women said “sex was not at all important.”
- Sex with a partner in the previous year was reported by 73% of those ages 64-75, 53% of those 64-75, and 26% of people 75-85.
- Women of all ages are less likely to be sexually active than men.
- People who rated their health “excellent” or “very good” were nearly twice as likely to be sexually active than those in poor health.
- More than half of those aged 50-75 said they gave or received oral sex, and the proportion of men to women matched up equally.
- Postmenopausal women who kept their vaginal muscles in tone with kegel exercises, or by regular clitoral stimulation to orgasm, did not have the “vaginal dryness” (reported by 39%) or “low desire” (43%) that some women experience.
- Men who reported two or more ejaculations a month had 33% lower rates of prostate cancer.

John H.J. Bancroft “Sex and Aging,” *The New England Journal of Medicine*. August 23, 2007. Volume 357: 820-22. Number 8. <http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/extract/357/8/820>

1953 study, *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female*, to a 2007 study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* of 3005 in-depth interviews with men and women aged 57 to 85, we now know that interest in sex declines only slightly with age, and drops off seriously only in our mid-seventies.¹

Declines in sexual activity usually correlate with health problems, or for women, lack of a partner. And just as our minds are kept sharp by doing Sudoku puzzles and crosswords, so our sexual parts stay in shape with ongoing workouts. Postmenopausal women who keep their vaginal muscles in tone with kegel exercises, or by regular clitoral stimulation to orgasm, do not have the predicted “vaginal dryness” or “low desire.” Moreover, men who report two or more ejaculations a month have a 33% lower rates of prostate cancer!

While most of this “sex research” counts merely the numbers of partners or times or ways people engage in different experiences to achieve orgasm (or not), thanks to veteran sex researcher Gina Ogden’s groundbreaking “Integrating Sexuality and Spirituality” (ISIS) survey, we finally have reliable data on how women think and feel and love, as well as what they do. In her beautifully written *The Heart and Soul of Sex*, Ogden demonstrates that women’s sexuality is full of power and potential. Through real life examples she shows how women in intimate relationships still can and do find the things they long for: love, pas-

sion, closeness, empathy, respect, a sense of renewed energy, connectedness to their partners and themselves, as well as to their personal definitions of “god” or spirituality.

Crone perspectives on sexuality are important, not only personally but politically. Our responses to stereotypes of aging have million dollar ramifications. Since sexuality is also about body image, or, how we feel about how we look, this aspect of our lives affects whom we choose to love, starting with ourselves in the mirror. Why are we bombarded with so many advertisements aimed at concealing, rather than celebrating the *character* in faces and bodies that inevitably mark our life’s passage? If we as crones measure ourselves against others’ ideas of “performance” and “function,” we become dangerously susceptible to marketing strategies that over-medicalize our lives from hormone therapy to pink Viagra.

And finally, sexuality involves who we love and live with, including whether and how we announce that publicly. Although we’ve made some progress since the ‘60s to prevent aging gay men and women, or unmarried couples, from facing double stereotypes as they explore living arrangements and long-term health care options, prejudice and myopia still exist. Many of us have work to do to counter both our own and our health providers’ assumption that everyone is heterosexual.

So let’s get ready to roll joyfully through our own piles of fallen leaves. This new generational permission to life-long sexual play is just beginning.

FINDINGS FROM GINA OGDEN’S ISIS SURVEY OF SEXUALITY & SPIRITUALITY

- 39% “Sex usually means intercourse”
- 85% “Sex is physical, but it also involves love, romance, even mystical union.”
- 78% “For me; sex is much more than intercourse; it involves all of me – heart, body, mind and soul.”
- 55% “When I open myself to warmth, desire, depth, expansion and trust, there is no separation between sex and spirit.”
- 45% “It is through my senses that I often experience God.”
- 51% “Mainly sex means communication with my partner.”
- 47% “For people who have been sexually disappointed or hurt, consciously giving and receiving sexual pleasure can be healing.”

Gina Ogden, The Heart and Soul of Sex: Making the ISIS Connection. Boston: Trumpeter/Shambhala, 2007 (pp. 189-190).

We can only guess how the newest crones will act and feel sexually. The first baby boomer applied for Social Security in 2007, and four times as many as ever before will become eligible in the next decade. Some of us were on the cutting edge of the sexual revolution. Many of us explored before we settled down. Others pushed increased divorce rates when our newfound “freedoms” gave us permission to leave hurtful relationships and move on. Then, in the ‘80s (what I call “the AIDies,”) the sexually transmitted disease epidemic forced more of us to shift again how quickly or safely we engaged in intimate relationships.

So as Gail Sheehy’s “seasoned” women (*Sex and the Seasoned Woman: Pursuing the Passionate Life*, 2007), let’s look for the good in all that has happened, and welcome our “second adulthood” around this vast, complex and mysterious part of our lives as a period of awakening. Who knows what kinds of future choices those of us prepared for and unafraid of change will make? Or how that will affect us and generations to follow?

This first column provides merely an overview of issues to explore in dialogue with you in *Crone*. I suggest you brainstorm questions and answers about aspects of crone sexuality you would like explored in depth with a close friend or in your crone circles. Some ideas for starters:

- What are your favorite erotic love scenes in fiction? And why?
- What are your favorite love scenes in movies/television?
- Who influenced your sexuality most significantly and how so?
- How have your feelings about your body image in the mirror changed over the years?
- What was the most outrageous thing you’ve ever done sexually?
- How have your erotic feelings towards women and/or men (your ambisexuality) changed over the decades?
- How would you like your grand-daughters to feel about their sexuality and relationships? What might help this happen?

I invite your questions as well as your feedback; email me at significantequal@yahoo.com or write to me c/o Crone; all questions will be treated confidentially but may become the subject of future columns. ☺

Endnote

¹John H.J. Bancroft, “Sex and Aging,” August 23, 2007. Volume 357: 820-22. Number 8. <http://content.nejm.org/cgi/content/extract/357/8/820>

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