

Biography of Joseph Kramer

by Margaret Wade, 2008

I grew up in a Catholic family that was very service oriented, very "other" conscious. My father was a lawyer who gave half of his time providing free service for the unprivileged and folks in trouble, so early on, I got this idea of service and connectedness to others. I was a very religious, I would say ecstatic, boy. Something my father and my grandmother instilled in me was a sense of awe and a love of nature. Even in my suburban neighborhood, I tried to get away and spend time in some little field or wooded area. As I got older, I channeled that sense of awe and wonder into mystical Christianity.

In the Catholic community, there is often recognition when someone is gay. The mother or father or the whole social structure sees that this is a boy or this is a girl who is oriented differently. This recognition is written into the Catholic subculture, and that's why there are so many Catholic priests who are gay. There's not an acknowledgment per se, and people will not say, "Oh, he's gay." What they do say, what they said to me countless times, from the time I was ten years old was, "Ah, I think you have a vocation. You should be a priest." Nuns and priests told me this. My parents were a little cooler about it, but clearly their vision was for me to be a priest.

At seventeen, straight out of high school, I gave up masturbation and joined the Society of Jesus, a Roman Catholic religious community also known as the Jesuits. For the next ten years, I

was tutored in the Jesuit path of the ecstatic celibate. It was a mystical, ecstatic path and a path of service. What I got from the Jesuits was the vision "to be a man for others." Along with that, I was made aware of my responsibility to gain skills and education so that I could be in service in the best possible way. I was taught to embody the divine, to be a person for others in the name of the incarnate god, Jesus. They called it, "To become other Christs." Later I would see that this calling is the same calling of the sacred prostitute who embodies the god or goddess they serve.

During my ten year long training with the Jesuits, I received one full body massage. That massage woke up such extraordinary new levels of consciousness in me that I thought, "That was the most important two hours of my life!" I had a new sense of embodiment and a new sense of wholeness as if long separated pieces of me had been brought back together. At the age of twenty-eight, after giving celibacy a real fair try, I realized that I could no longer deny the world of bodily sensation. I realized I did not have "the gift of celibacy." With great sadness, I came to realize that the Jesuits were not the community for me. I recognized that there were many people who were priests and nuns because they felt called to something and saw only one option, but I knew there was more and wanted to explore my options.

I left the celibate seminary life to explore gay life in New York City. At this time, the late 1970s and early 1980s, AIDS was taking an enormous toll on gay men, and there developed not just fear but terror about sex. Many men isolated themselves and just stopped having any intimate connection at all. The need for safe, sexual sensation and connection was vital. My Jesuit training, my commitment to serving others, led me to become a masseur. So I left New York for a month long trip to California to study Esalen massage. Though not sexual, the long, sensuous strokes were intensely pleasurable and capable of producing delightful trance states. I found that I had a gift for touch, but I had not imagined erotic massage until some time later when

several of my clients made, not salacious, but genuine, heartfelt requests for healing sexual touch. Realizing that erotic massage offered the possibility of safe sexual connection, I began to offer this touch as part of my practice.

The erotic massage I developed was actually based on my experience of oral sex, but because of the risk of HIV/AIDS, the massage couldn't be oral. It had to be touch, and actually, I think that hands offer more expansive stimulation than the mouth and throat. I observed that when erotic energy got activated or awakened in this expansive way, men experienced new power and a new sense of self. I began to think of myself as an erotic shaman.

That was the genesis of Taoist Erotic Massage. I used the term "Taoist," because that was my interpretive system. I had studied acupuncture; I knew the meridian system of the body, and I thought, "This is about circulation of erotic energy throughout the body through the meridians." According to Taoist thought, our genitals are generators of energy. We were learning to circulate the erotic energy, not release it, so that men could sustain high states of arousal and build enormous energy. This is very different from the traditional sex model which I call "balloon sex," where the goal is only to build to a climax. I'm not one who says that men should never ejaculate, but in my teaching I do say, "You people have doctoral degrees in ejaculation by this time. Why not try non-ejaculation and see what happens?" I feel that it's very important that men know that they have a choice and that they know what the opportunities are.

To enhance the effectiveness of the massage, I taught my clients to breathe using a kind of conscious breathing called Rebirthing Breath, which I learned in a year-long training program with Claire Arnesen. This breathing process circulates energy, charges the body, and can bring about blissful, full-body states of reality as well as emotional release and transformation. In addition to the training, I scheduled twenty-five individual sessions with Claire. Sitting with me for hours coaching and observing my

breathing, Claire recognized the severe, armor-creating shame I had developed growing up a homosexual boy in a conservative Catholic culture. She suggested that I do erotic meditation exercises to relieve my body of the armoring.

During the exercises I was to masturbate, use the Rebirthing Breath and visualize healthy, affirming scenes with important people from my past. I visualized my father regarding me with approval for my sexuality. I visualized my mother loving every part of me, even my homosexuality. I masturbated and breathed while visualizing being in the church, in the school of my youth. I even masturbated with Jesus looking on while he told me of his unconditional love. Claire had me repeat the exercises over and over during a three month period. With every repetition, I became freer, more alive and healthier.

I also borrowed an exercise called The Big Draw from contemporary Taoist master Mantak Chia, and used it to help my clients move into higher levels of feeling. The Big Draw allows people to have full body, orgasmic experiences without discharging ejaculate or, if you are in the energy model, without discharging the energy. The Big Draw pumps the orgasmic energy from the genitals, up the back, down through the center of the front of the body, and back into the genitals. With erotic massage, rhythmic breathing and The Big Draw in combination, men were having experiences that were ecstatic, prolonged, multiply orgasmic and transformative. They were regularly seeing visions and going into deep trances very much like LSD-induced states of consciousness or a state akin to runner's high. Something big was happening.

Over a thousand massages later, I founded The Body Electric School of Massage and Rebirthing with Claire Arnesen onboard to teach the Rebirthing courses. Because I had found other massage classes to be homophobic, I was determined to offer a professional massage certification in a homosexual-friendly environment. That was 1984, and the beginning of The Body Electric School which takes its name from Walt Whitman's poem,

"I Sing the Body Electric." I was drawn to Whitman not only because he was a great poet, but because he was gay and because of his years of service nursing the wounded and dying during the Civil War.

Inspired by Whitman and by the HIV/AIDS crisis sweeping the San Francisco Bay area, I hired Irene Smith, a masseuse for people with AIDS. Irene's training in touch for people with life threatening illnesses became part of the required curriculum. I left erotic massage out of the curriculum while I continued to offer it in private practice. The need for education about safe, erotic touch was clear, but so was my fear of losing my license from the state of California. By 1986, I could no longer allow my fears to keep me from teaching hands-on safe sex in the form of the Taoist Erotic Massage.

I knew I had opened up a very powerful medium with Taoist Erotic Massage and, perhaps because I had seen the power of the community coming together for Catholic Mass, I suspected that the power would be greatly amplified when experienced in group or tribe. Indeed, I found that even though the physiological response to extended erotic sensation was the same during a private session as it was in a group, the outcome proved to be quite different. Experiencing a high level of erotic arousal in a group context had the potential to bring about far more substantial change. I believe it is in the group or tribal setting that we need to shake off shame, because that is where so much shame is put upon us. If in a group context, we're seen as erotic beings and affirmed for it rather than shamed for it, we can better step into what is erotically possible, what is humanly possible, so I began to develop and offer classes. What I did was simply to bring people together to explore erotic and ecstatic states. I wanted to have a place where the rules were changed and where we could really get involved in being fully embodied, erotic, whole human beings.

In these groups, I noticed that the men who tried to hang on or keep control had very ordinary experiences. I realized I needed a

two-day program with the first day being choreographed exercises designed to help people take down their barriers and build up their trust. By the second day, possessing a greater sense of trust, they could better surrender to the erotic touch and the high states of consciousness it aroused. The more men surrendered, the higher they went, the more powerful their experience. Surrender is a very important spiritual teaching in most religions, and here it was in a very physical form where the quality of the experience depended not on doing, but on letting go. (It is interesting that the Kama Sutra has nine chapters dedicated to oral sex in which men are schooled to be totally receptive, to surrender.) Many participants reported life changing experiences, which included letting go of fears and healing of past traumas. Many experienced a feeling of love for the whole world, a feeling of body and spirit coming together. Some reported having a direct experience of God.

I believe that the biggest work that I have done so far is dispersing or dealing with shame. There is an insidious shame that we don't even know exists, because it is so imbedded in the culture. It's a shame about being naked, about having a less than perfect or aging body, about masturbating, about having an erection or not having an erection. Part of what I've witnessed with folks on my table, or in a class, who are aroused for a period of time is that those cultural structures of shame come to the fore where they can be recognized for what they are – a con. They are like the Emperor's New Clothes. We all agree to see them, but they don't really exist. Recognition of this dynamic helps allow the shame to drop away.

In addition to running the school, teaching classes and hospice work, I saw up to thirty private massage clients a week. I booked them back to back, and just got into a mode which I called Massage Monk. Often I wouldn't even eat. I would just go for hours. When I was in Massage Monk mode, I was in a wonderful feeling state that eating would have interrupted.

In the midst of all the erotic touch, I began to question my role. Given my background, I couldn't help but think that what I was doing was prostitution. Of course, I had always been taught prostitution was wrong, but something felt so right about it. At the same time, I noticed that certain individuals who attended the weekend classes felt deeply, spiritually moved in the role of the erotic masseur. I began searching for a vision, some name or concept for what I was experiencing in my own work and witnessing in the classes.

That's when I started investigating the ancient sacred prostitute tradition. I learned how what I was doing was similar and how it was different. Sacred prostitutes of the past were part of the fabric of society, part of a temple or church, part of the establishment. They were people, mostly women, who served to embody the divine goddess. Connection with a sacred prostitute was connection with the divine. In 1990, I invited fifty-five men to join me for six days of training and exploration into the role of service as a sacred prostitute. Initially I called this training Sacred Prostitute Summer Camp, but because the word "prostitute" carries such a negative meaning, I changed the name to Sacred Intimate Training.

Today's sacred prostitutes are still in service to some vision of the divine, but they are not integrated into society. They work alone. They're outlaws. In my mind, what defines sacred prostitutes then, and sacred prostitutes or intimates now, is that they are present for the highest good of their client and in service to a greater power. It's all about intention. They are intimate out of compassion, offering a great opportunity for sexual joy, celebration, healing and transformation through this sacred erotic connection. I want to be careful not to define sacred intimacy in a purely therapeutic model, because it is more about being a shaman, about creating an environment of hospitality, vulnerability, equality, openness, pleasure and connection so that transformation can happen. As sacred intimates, we are a lot like Johnny Appleseed, planting seeds, erotic seeds, expecting results, knowing we've done our best. We never know exactly what will

happen. We can't know the script ahead, but something beckons us to go deeper and deeper into what I call the mystical place, the place of awe. We go because we are compelled beyond resistance. You just have to trust the process, take the next step and travel on.

By the fall of 1992, I felt that my mission with The Body Electric School was complete, so I sold the school to Collin Brown who had been my office manager and had participated in many trainings since 1990. Part of what I learned from the Jesuits, and part of what I try to impart in my teaching, is the need for ongoing discernment. In every stage of one's life, one has to discern what his or her gifts are, what he or she should be doing, how to best make use of their time. I knew that the school would thrive in the hands of those I had trained and I knew there were other things for me to do.

One of those other things was to create a teaching video so that I could offer people a way of learning Taoist Erotic Massage in the privacy of their own homes. The first of these teaching videos was "Fire on the Mountain" which, amazingly, was named by Time-Warner's Book of the Month Club as its sex education video choice. They sold more than 2500 copies in one month! The call was clear. I had educated only about 2000 men in six years of classes! Since then I have been making and promoting many more teaching videos and DVDs. I do this because, in the area of sex, we've not been educated. We don't know what's possible. We're educated in all kinds of other areas, but not about our own fire, our own eroticism. I'm doing this because most people don't know what their options are. I call for zero tolerance for sexual ignorance.

By the year 2000, recognizing that all of the work I and others were doing with sacred intimacy was flying under the radar, I felt I somehow needed to take the work to the next level. I wanted to bring sacred intimacy out from the underground, out of the closet, into the culture in a much bigger way. I wanted to see this work conjoined with psychotherapy and teaching in a way that

would be beneficial for all. You can talk to a psychotherapist about sexual abuse for years, but for intervention on the physical plane, we call on a sacred intimate or erotic shaman. It is in the physical world that the trauma took place and that's where the healing most effectively takes place.

Erotic work needs to move into the open, on the screen so that it can be part of the network of society, recognized for its profound healing nature and as a spiritual path. I want people in the Catholic Church to say, "He or she is on a sexual, spiritual path." This is the next big step. In order to understand and facilitate this, I completed my doctoral degree in Human Sexuality at The Institute for Advanced Study of Human Sexuality in San Francisco in 2002. A lot of psychotherapists and other professionals come to this school -- which is the only professional school of sex -- to get training in various aspects of human sexuality.

After completing my degree, I approached the administration of the school and said, "I think that erotic bodywork, sacred intimacy, needs to be part of your graduate school program. It needs to be available, though not required, for a Ph.D. or Master's degree in human sexuality or public health and sexual education." In the next breath, I had convinced the school and the state of California to allow me to offer a certified course in what we are calling Sexological Bodywork which is a half-trimester, 300-hour course.

When I started the Sexological Bodywork program, I had to stop doing individual sessions because those sessions required a tremendous amount of focus, creativity and energy, which I needed for writing and other academic pursuits. Now once again, I am venturing into doing one-on-one bodywork sessions.

My vision today is to see conscious, skilled, erotic touch evolve to reach more people and to become ever more effective. I really think we need a system of peer review, supervision and ongoing education for Sexological Bodyworkers. We also need a national peer body so that we can have a professional affiliation with

educational resources, referral services and the ability to network. Tomorrow I may have another vision to build on. There's always another vision.

**From the book, "[Reclaiming Eros](#)"
By Margaret Wade and Suzanne Blackburn**

2020 Note: Joseph has helped found six Sexological Bodywork schools world-wide:

Institute of Somatic Sexology
<http://instituteofsomaticsexology.com>

Instituto Latino Americano de Sexologia Somática
<https://ilass.com.br/>

The Sea School of Embodiment
www.seaschoolofembodiment.com/

Institute for the Study of Somatic Sexology
<https://somaticsexeducator.com>

**Institut Für Somatische Bildung, Sexualität & Körperarbeit
Berlin**
<https://www.isbberlin.com/>

International Institute of Sexological Bodywork
<https://sexologicalbodywork.ch>