

***How Unwanted Sexual Behavior Narrates Our Past and Reveals Our Desired Future***  
*Illustrative Content from Jay Stringer's forthcoming book in 2018*

jay-stringer.com  
stringer.jay@gmail.com

**"Every man who knocks on the door of a brothel is looking for God."**

**Chesterton**

**INTRODUCTION**

A man I was counseling – I'll call him Jeffrey – sat in my office a week before Christmas after being arrested on charges of soliciting prostitution. He is one of hundreds of thousands of men who buy sex in the United States. In our first session together, Jeffery reported having bought sex on Friday afternoons since his college days in Pennsylvania. He did not know all the reasons he was driven to buy sex, but he did know it was something he could not imagine life without.

I asked Jeffery what Friday afternoons have meant for him historically. "Like in childhood?" he asked. I nodded my head in agreement. "Well, my mom would usually leave my older brother and I home alone on the weekends because she worked a second job. We were always on the verge of poverty and she was gone quite a bit (his father left the family when he was 11 years old). My older brother was more of a loner – could stay inside listening to music or playing video games for hours. I wasn't like that, I usually just rode my bike around the neighborhood." I asked him if it was fair to say he was out looking to find something or someone if he rode his bike on a 'usual basis'. Jeffrey thought for a moment and said, "Sure. I remember cruising through my neighborhood trying to find girls I knew from middle school. I would ride around for

hours, just to see if I could get ‘that look’ from a classmate.” Twenty years later, Jeffrey’s Friday afternoon ritual, unbeknownst to him was essentially the same. The mountain bike became an SUV and a mother with a second job was now a spouse whose job at a concert venue required her to work weekends.

At the end of our first session, it was apparent that Jeffrey’s strategy to ride away from loneliness and anger of a painful childhood had become the very vehicle that was now driving him into a life of crisis. This is often the case with our unwanted sexual behaviors; the activities and behaviors that help us survive our formative exiles tend to lead us into slavery or relational conflict later in life. The faces he sought out in middle school, which brought him a sense of validation and even rest, were now costing him over tens of thousands of dollars a year when we added up all of the expenses associated with buying sex. These financial costs were only a microcosm of all the other damage occurring in his life – secrecy and isolation in his marriage and primary relationships, anxiety about losing his political office if he was discovered, and a deep seeded belief that shame would be his closest ally.

As a clinician and pastoral leader, these are the types of conversations I have on a weekly basis. The bias I bring to my work is that unwanted sexual behavior – be it buying sex, viewing pornography, extra-marital affairs, and the like are due to the unresolved issues of your life. Although we often spend the majority of our lives attempting to run or hide from these issues, I believe that they are the DNA we must study to help us learn what it means to heal and transform our lives. Although we are prone to despising our addictions and compulsive behaviors, I invite you to the counterintuitive path of curiosity. This involves the humility to acknowledge that there is far more you do not understand about your unwanted sexual behavior and if you can

ponder it afresh, the exposure you will experience is not unto shame, but into the most sacred longings of your heart.

### *Embracing the Complexity*

My belief is that we need a holistic perspective on sexual issues, one that involves cultural, psychological/physiological, and spiritual lenses. In learning from each perspective, my intention is to arrive at a holistic understanding of the roots of problematic sexual behavior (How did I get here? Part I), examining why it is so difficult to break free from these issues (Why do I stay? Part II), and exploring how the process of healing and change can unfold (Where do I go from here? Part III).

This trinity of perspectives allows each lens to work in collaboration rather than being pitted against the other. By the word cultural, I simply mean that we exist within the particular context of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Our culture shapes our imagination and provides avenues and situations through which our desires can become reality. Jeffrey had been shaped by a world that has often blamed women in prostitution for being temptresses while simultaneously desiring websites where illicit forms of sex can be watched and purchased. By psychologically and physiologically, I mean that our current behavior is not an isolated silo from our life history, but rather is the latest chapter in a story that has been in formation since our childhood. Jeffrey's pattern of cruising on Friday afternoons for "that look" had antecedents in adolescence and his lack of loving attachment figures was instrumental in him elevating sexual satisfaction as his most important need and dependable ally. These life events shaped much of his brain neurochemistry in terms of how it anticipates, focuses and responds to sexual possibility and gratification. Finally, by spiritually I am referring to the good and evil, which exist within us. The behaviors and desires we yield to will inevitably affect our heart and soul. As treatment progressed, Jeffrey used the word "enslaved" to refer to his affections. He

recognized that his behavior was not coming out of a place of delight or beauty, but rather a heart that had become merged with something of evil.

The statistics associated with unwanted sexual behavior in our world are staggering. The National Council on Sexual Addiction Compulsivity reports that between 6% to 8% of all Americans can be classified as addicted to sex. This represents an alarming 18-24 million people. The largest consumers of pornography are 12 to 17 year-old boys and most children are first exposed to it between the ages of 9 and 14. The age of first exposure will likely become younger and younger as personal digital devices become more common. Additionally, 30% of all data transferred across the internet is for porn, 13% of all web searches are for erotic content, and 2/3 of HR professionals have found porn on employee's work computers. And faith leaders are not immune from this as the latest research indicates that 50% of our pastors report struggling with pornography. And if all of that was not enough, the average age of initial involvement in prostitution for girls is between 12 and 14 years of age. It should be clear that what Jeffrey is experiencing is not a unique or isolated case.

#### *A Word on Addiction Treatment*

My agenda is not to have you adopt my point of view, but rather to ask you how your respective point of view informs your understanding of the origins of unwanted sexual behavior, why you continue to stay in a place of enslavement, and therefore what the process of healing will require. In the addiction treatment community I work within, there is a preponderance of thought about how addictions exist because they do what they promise – to give you a sense of pleasure. Therefore, healing is a matter of growing in maturity to be able to choose healthier alternatives and pursue more legitimate forms of pleasure, which do not compromise your relationships or conscience. Although I would agree with aspects of this premise, what is rarely

addressed is that addicts intuitively know that their behavior will bring a level of condemnation and accusation each time they indulge. I do not see this self-contempt as an unwanted byproduct, but the aim and fuel for all of our addictive behavior. This book will invite you to enter your life story to understand how you have become addicted not primarily to sex, but bonded to feelings of shame and judgment.

To be human is to have an innate longing for meaning and relationships. We want to know that our lives matter and we long to have people in our life who offer care, support and participation in our lives. When meaning and relationships are missing or at a deficit, there will almost always be the growth of some type of an addiction. Unwanted sexual behavior is certainly an attempt to cope with the futility and loneliness of life, but far more these issues convince us that we will never have the type of life or love we desire. We end up believing that it is our failures that make us unlovable, but very few of us have the courage to enter the stories of harm that left us feeling orphaned and estranged in the world long before we had a rap sheet of sexual failures to pin our problems on. As one songwriter recently wrote, “every gambler knows that to lose is what you’re really there for.” This book is an invitation to heal, but to do so by understanding why you have become a person who would prefer to lose or sabotage the things you most care about.

#### *A Word on Faith*

In the religious community I am involved with there is a well-meaning, but truncated understanding of the gospel, which is offered to men to address their behavior. Time and time again I hear stories and sermons from religious leaders who want the hearts of men to be captured by the gospel, but do not take the time to journey with them through the formative terrain which has marked their life. We want to see resurrection and transformation, but we often do so through ignoring the abuse,

betrayal, and neglect these men have experienced. If we do not know the stories that have led to their present sexual struggles, we should question whether or not we have earned the privilege to talk to them about the hope we think they should find in the gospel. The gospel is dynamic, a form of TNT and for it to be life altering, it must be wedged deeply into the crevices of darkness and pain that exist within the hearts of men. This work is rarely general; it is always tactical and contextual.

It is my conviction that the God of the Universe is neither surprised nor ashamed of the behaviors that we have participated in, but sees them as the very stage through which the work of healing will be played out. This is to say that God intends to use our stories to bring about not only our own healing, but also the healing of others. The writer of Ecclesiastes says that, “with more knowledge, comes more grief; the more I understand, the more grief I undergo.” For God to know us means God moves towards us with kindness and grief. This is the pattern of the incarnation; God taking up residence in the places of our pain and destruction.

Over the years in my work with human trafficking, sex buyers, and commercial sexual exploitation, I have experienced a deep resonance with the writer of Ecclesiastes - the more knowledge I have of commercial sexual exploitation (prostitution), pornography and demand, the more grief I have for the men and women whose lives have been impacted by sexual addiction and violence. When I look back upon my story, I recognize that as the son of a minister I had an intuitive sense of knowing what behaviors were permissible and which ones I should refrain from and hide. The complexity is that the unwanted parts do not disappear, rather they get buried and compound with pain, secrecy and shame as the decades roll on. What is largely missed by both religious and non-religious cultures is the ability to be curious about our fantasies and arousal. Religious culture often invites us to eliminate them through

pursuing virtue while non-religious cultures invite us to participate in them as long as they do not negatively affect others, at least in the short-term. What if there was another way? I believe there is and it begins by asking better questions about our addictions and sexual struggles.

### *Distorted Stories*

Universally, clients have their first taste of the freedom they are desperately seeking the moment they discover and accept that “stopping” bad behavior is not the answer. Rather, it is precisely in the unwanted behavior where we find the keys to the freedom we are seeking. Therefore, the sooner we assume a posture of curiosity rather than contempt for our sexual struggles, the more we will prepare our bodies and minds for the difficult and redemptive work ahead. What this looks like is this: instead of condemning your arousal, ask if it might be an attempt to reverse or repeat the stories in your past like humiliation, abuse or emotional incest. Or, rather than vowing for the 1000<sup>th</sup> time to not search for pornography, pause for a moment and reflect about the search terms and sexual scenarios you type into your search engine. Might they be trying to tell you something about your past or what types of futility and pain you are currently experiencing in your day-to-day life?

Most of us live with a baseline level of loneliness, futility and pain and pornography and prostitution are always lingering around the corner for you to be seduced into a world that offers both a sense of mastery and escape in an alternative universe. This universe is one where lust *and* anger reign and offer you comfort and the ability to degrade the face of others as you wish. Our sexual behavior is the climax of how we have learned to exist in the world. If we have known betrayal, abuse, loss, loneliness, dogmatism these themes will inevitably show up in our use or avoidance of sex. The same is true of themes like trust, beauty, and belonging. Are you captured by

goodness and beauty or are you bound to a world where you must demand power and control to survive? These are the questions and dynamics I most desire for us to address as we journey through this book.

I invite you to these questions and curiosity with a full recognition that this is much easier said than done. I remember stretching before a baseball game in college, when a coach observed how much I “forced” my body to become flexible. What he said next was this, “Your breath will determine your movement and flexibility. If you cannot breathe into the stretch, you are forcing your body into something it is not ready for. Inhaling and exhaling is much more powerful than you know.” In the same way, I invite you to stay with your story – your behavior and your fantasies – to the degree to which you can be kind and honest. This is not a forceful task, it is one where you inhale all that troubles and alarms you and exhale into meaning, kindness, and beauty.

What I have learned about unwanted sexual behavior is that your understanding of your life and its history should be suspect. Every client I have ever worked with finds it much easier to condemn their own behavior at a surface level than to grieve the formative experiences which set-up their behavior. One client I was working with told me he did not want to talk about his past sexual abuse, he only wanted to learn the skills to eliminate patronizing prostitutes. As treatment progressed, what he eventually named was his mother used to have him sleep in her bedroom when his father was away on business trips. She disclosed to him that his dad did “bad things with other ladies” on these trips. His mother would be very emotional during these trips and in the evenings, she would ask him to massage her bare back as she cried herself to sleep. What this client eventually named was that he felt so used by his mother and abandoned by his cowardly father. Prostitution became a way for him to act out his anger at women, while also pursuing sex where no “emotional residue with a woman”

was required. He preferred to see himself as a “messed up man”, rather than entering into both grief and anger for how his sexuality was groomed.

*This book is about understanding how your sexual struggles are really about the unexamined and therefore unresolved issues in your life. We prefer to crop our life story in a way that places our current problematic behavior in the forefront and cuts out the stories where pain and heartache struck our life, long before we started making compromised sexual decisions. In the same way that we might look at a war veteran and see their alcoholism through the lens of trauma they have undergone, I am asking for us to see our sexual brokenness through the lens of our formative stories of trauma, abuse, and pain. This is never an attempt to excuse problematic and violent behavior; we enter our past because narrative holds the key to unlocking destructive patterns and implementing all future change effective change. It is in this tension between curiosity and accountability that we will sit for the duration of our time together in this book. As such, you will see that I return to this point along the way.*

The stories we have lived through serve as an uncanny map, one which tells the story of our past and, if we pay attention, one that invites us to shape the direction of our future. When we are willing to enter into the ways we were used and harmed, we are much more likely to address our use and harm of others. The goal of healing is not simply cessation of problematic behavior; it is a heart that mourns brokenness and stands against perversion. We are called not just to grieve the brokenness around us, but seek out beauty and not her counterfeits as our source of delight.

### *My Story*

We are more likely to be ashamed of our fantasies, perversions and acting out when we do not understand them. Recognizing the meaning of my fantasies has been one of the most significant aspects of my journey into sexual wholeness. A number of

years ago, I was talking to my therapist about sexual fantasies I have been troubled and ashamed by for over a decade. Before I mentioned them, I told my therapist I considered never talking about them in therapy because I thought she would tell me that I had no right to be involved in the type of work I do. She asked me how I had come to this conclusion and noted how odd it would be for me to be involved with the population of men I see with without working out a great deal of my own sexual life. Her words to me were illuminating and liberating because she located me within my life story, not in my perceived failure.

I went on to tell her some of the unique aspects of my fantasy life and how they have been present with me since I was an early teen. I put my head down after I told her further details of this dimension of my life. She waited to speak until I could look back up and said, “Jay, tell me again about where you come from – what was your role in your family?” I am a therapist and I was annoyed at her question. I wanted her to condemn me, I didn’t want her to help me to know and therefore to come to love my story. I did not want to talk about my family; I wanted her to be troubled by my confession, even to imply that I should take an extended break from being a therapist and reverend in order to heal my heart. She did not do this; instead she stood by her question and waited 30 seconds for me to respond.

I told her that my parents and siblings used to tell me their problems with one another and I would serve as a container for their resentments and concerns. “Only if that was all!” she said playfully. “Anything else?” I went on to tell her again about my story – that I would be an emotional support for my mom when my dad was unhappy or would busy himself with his pastoral duties. I was gifted at being able to read the angry and pain-ridden faces of my mom and present my life to her as the caring son. My therapist nodded and said, “And now tell me what you know about the lives of the

women who have entered into your fantasy life? I would imagine you have thought about meeting their needs and playing out this drama in the same way you used to do with your mom?”

I was speechless, but felt like the matrix of my sexual life was finally integrating and clarifying. Her questions helped inform a great deal of my sexual life including fantasies, pornography preferences and a great deal of my style-of-relating with women. Blankets of shame and condemnation were lifting off because she was inviting me not primarily to change, but to engage the harm I was set-up for. I got out of the session and wrote down this sentence in my journal: “If we fail to engage the way we were sexualized in the past, we leave open the high probability that these patterns will become more pronounced in the future.” We must come to recognize and eventually grieve how our current fantasies and sexual acts are related to the unexamined dimensions of our past. Our sexuality is the climax of how we have learned to make our life work in a fallen and beautiful world.

### *Curiosity and Healing*

There is an ancient narrative about an Egyptian teenager by the name of Hagar who is bought in as a concubine for a powerful couple who is experiencing infertility issues. In the Ancient Near East, this was an acceptable option for a couple to choose when they could not produce an heir through natural means. Hagar, which means stranger or sojourner, successfully conceives a child, but the barren wife turns on her and unleashes mistreatment. The translators of this story have remarked that this mistreatment has a particularly cruel bent to it, some even suggesting it to be as severe as a sexual assault. In the next scene, Hagar is on the run, heading into the desert, where by all accounts, she will die.

It is here in the wilderness, the geography of trauma and death that a miraculous thing happens. The presence of God finds this pregnant concubine and asks her two questions. “*Where do you come from?*” and “*Where are you going?*” Is it striking to you that God is curious? What I want to underscore is that the voice of the Lord is never filled with contempt or accusation. If you are hearing a voice of condemnation or frustration with regard to your sexual longings, behavior or confusion, even if on paper it appears to be true, it is not the voice of God. More than likely, it is your own self-contempt and/or the disappointment of others that you are projecting and transferring onto God. As one mystic once said, “I pray to God to rid me of God.”

Furthermore, any system or person be it a non-profit, a church, a parent, a pastor, a therapist, or a friend that attempts to use your struggles to point out that you are damaged goods or shameful or sick or foolish or unwanted is in no way partnering with God in bringing about healing or transformation. What they have more than likely done however is to influence you into greater involvement and greater secrecy in the behavior itself. If an alcoholic drinks to deal with the shame of drinking, sexual addicts often pursue sexual behavior to address the shame of sexual failure. It is a tragic cycle. The economy of evil does not have to work very hard to be successful because the profit it earns off the compounding interest of sexual shame is astounding.

### *What Happens Now*

In the following chapters, we will explore three questions together. The first is a question of lament – how did I get here? This section will involve a journey back into the most formative years of your life. The intention is not to blame your parents or faith communities, but to see how the work and harm of evil has been seeking to divide you throughout your life from the beauty and glory of your body and the profound gift of sex. It is my hope that you will know sorrow and even anger as you confront this pain.

The second question will ask honesty and vulnerability from you— why do I stay? This section will survey the deep ruts of your addiction and the anchors that keep you riveted to it. My hope is that this question will corner you with how your addiction serves you, despite its consequences. It is one thing to want freedom; it is another to understand why it is easier to stay in bondage. And finally, the question you think you are most here to answer – how do I get out of here? My hope is that by the time you get to this third question, sections one and two have more or less convinced you that until you understand them, attempts to get out from the grip of your unwanted behavior are futile. If you go to section three – how do I get out of here? – before traversing through sections one and two of the book, return it, and get your money back. Many have written books on this topic and have deceived their readers into believing there are secrets, steps, and strategies that will free them. The reason these books and blogs either do not work or last only a short season is because they bypass the most significant questions of how you got here and why you stay. Inside the answers to these questions are where you become human. It is just not possible to get to fullness of what liberation can offer you without deeply exploring the first two questions.

This book is about asking you questions far more than it is about telling you what you have done and how to stop. As we begin this journey, will you begin to ask yourself - where is it that I come from? And where is it that I am going? May your heart be able to take in the great tragedy and beauty that your story reveals.